

Fantasy and Loss

In Circumstantial Childlessness

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Abstract

The incidence of unintentional childlessness in women who have, as popular comment puts it, ‘left it too late’, is rising markedly in many western nations, yet the experience is not well understood. This thesis focuses on issues of fantasy, loss, and grieving in the experience of 26 New Zealand women in their 30s and 40s who are what Cannold (2005) has termed ‘circumstantially childless’; that is women who expected to have children but find themselves at the end of their natural fertility without having done so for—at least initially—social rather than biological reasons.

I explore the conscious and unconscious dimensions of the fantasies that many of the women interviewed have about themselves as mothers in relation to a child or children. I argue that these fantasies have their origins in these women’s trans-subjective relationship with their mothers before birth, the intersubjective relationship after birth, and the mutual overlapping of their unique psychobiography and the social worlds in which they have become adults. Circumstantial childlessness entails a loss of the potential to embody their fantasies about themselves as mothers. The thesis uses psychoanalytic and contemporary grief theories to explore their experience of loss and grieving, and their adaptation of their fantasies when the potential to embody them has passed. It calls for a reconceptualization of maternal subjectivity to encompass the creative and satisfying alternative ways that women who do not have children embody ‘mother’ in their lives.

The study’s psychoanalytically-informed psychosocial methodology entailed the innovative use of participant-produced drawings, and the development of a method of recording protocols—based on Bollas’ (2007) notion of a symphonic score—to systematically record non-linguistic elements of the texts (such as sighs, hesitations, laughter, repetitions, and tears) across the range of the semi-structured individual and group interview transcripts. In this respect, the thesis contributes to investigations of social life that move beyond the limits of conventional text-based methods of inquiry and interpretation.

Chapter 1: “A sense of myself as a mother”

(Much) of our so-called mental life is about the lives we are not living, the lives we are missing out on, the lives we could be leading but for some reason are not. What we fantasize about, what we long for, are the experiences, the things and the people that are absent.

(Phillips 2012, p.xi)

Children are never simply themselves, co-extensive with their own bodies, becoming alive to us when they turn in the womb, or with their first unaided breath. Their lives start long before birth, long before conception, and if they are aborted or miscarried or simply fail to materialize at all, they become ghosts within our lives.

(Mantell 2003, p.228)

1.1 Circumstantial childlessness

This thesis explores aspects of a particular form of childlessness in women, which, like Cannold (2000), I am describing as ‘circumstantial childlessness’.¹ Circumstantially childless women are those who have seen themselves as having a biological child or children at some point in their lives and who—as far as they know—are physically capable of conceiving and bearing a child, but have come to or are approaching the end of their reproductive years without giving birth. They are in the unusual—but not uncommon—position of being neither ‘voluntarily childless’ (since they would like to have a child), nor ‘involuntarily childless’ (since they were as far as they knew, at least initially, biologically capable of doing so).²

In an article in which she addressed public criticism of Australia’s then Prime Minister Julia Gillard for being “childless”, journalist Gillian Guthrie (2012) discussed her own childlessness and commented that she was “not in the right relationship at the right time and just kept working”.³ Her ‘explanation’ is a reiteration of a circulating social narrative (Somers 1994) whereby circumstantially childless women are understood as not having become

¹ Cannold developed the term ‘circumstantial childlessness’ in her doctoral thesis, which I discuss later in this chapter. Initially I referred to this phenomenon as ‘contingent childlessness’ (Tonkin 2010), since for me that emphasized the sense in which having a child was about women managing a set of contingent factors, rather than simply getting the circumstances ‘right’. The women in one of the group interviews, however, were very resistant to the idea of ‘contingency’. They felt it suggested they had “poor risk management”; that it carried some judgment, some sense of “why didn’t you see that coming?” Their sensitivity may have been related to issues of ‘choice’ and their perception of other peoples’ responses to their not having children. These are issues I address throughout the thesis.

² The phenomenon of circumstantial childlessness is not new. For example, Nicholson (2007) writes that during the First World War nearly three-quarters of a million British soldiers—many of them unmarried—died. Forty years later two-thirds of older unmarried women surveyed in Britain in the 1960s felt that they had missed out on having children, and commented on the gaps that childlessness had left in their lives. These women might also be understood to be circumstantially childless, albeit in very different social and historical circumstances.

³ March 6, 2012 *Sydney Morning Herald*. The article was written by Gillian Guthrie and preceded the launch of her book *Childlessness: Reflections on life’s longing for itself* (Short Stop Press, 2012).

biological mothers because they have not found a suitable partner. In the same week in New Zealand, in a 'Sunday' magazine article that explored the experience of women who find themselves in this predicament through the narrative of journalist Abbey Stirling (2012), Dr Richard Fisher of Fertility Associates is quoted as saying it is "a little bit about organizing your life, it's a little bit about organizing your career, but mostly it's about not having the right partner. It is certainly the most common reason. They just haven't happened to have met the person they want to have a family with". Although there were other reasons, not having a partner or having one who was unwilling to have children with them *was* the main reason women in my study gave for not having had children. Over and over again women talked of not being able to find someone who would be both a good parent and "life partner" at the time they wanted a baby or to become a mother. Connie, for example, said, "that whole period in my 30s when I felt very maternal there wasn't anyone to have a relationship to start a family with".

1.2 Conceiving the project

An analysis that reduces this phenomenon to a problem of organization and chance does not take account of the psychosocial complexities of the construction of both 'the right relationship' and 'the right time'. Nor does it provide a framework for reflection on what Connie might mean when she talks of feeling "maternal". Circumstantial childlessness is produced in the way these notions—along with others about motherhood and femininity—are constructed and entangled with women's conscious and unconscious fantasies, desires, anxieties, and ambivalence about becoming mothers, and with the limits and possibilities both of female embodiment and of agency around reproductive decision-making in their lives. This psychosocial tangle is at the heart of this thesis, and an awareness of these complexities shaped my framing of it, and the methodologies I saw as being most effective in researching it.

My interest in the topic initially arose out of my professional experience as a counsellor (with a particular expertise in issues of loss and grief) working with several women who were circumstantially childless. These women came to counselling with a range of issues related to their feelings of loss, but a common theme was a sense that what they described as their 'childlessness'—and their grief response to it—was misunderstood, criticized or unacknowledged. At times they felt harshly judged by others in their social worlds, and they often spoke of a distressing and lonely sense of inauthenticity in their lives; a jarring disjuncture between the 'mask' they were required to wear socially and the hidden face of

their painful feelings about not having had a child (Tonkin forthcoming). Many invoked the popular metaphor of a ‘biological clock running out’, talked about their ‘window of opportunity’ for having a baby closing in terms of their natural fertility, and expressed a sense of anxious urgency about having a child while it was still possible for them biologically to do so.⁴ Almost all talked about how difficult it was to speak about this experience to others around them.

Given that these women sought my professional help as a counsellor because they were struggling with aspects of not having become a biological mother, it was important for me to distinguish the overlaps and differences between my work as a counsellor and my task as a researcher at every step of this thesis project; conceiving and framing it, interviewing participants, and analyzing the research materials. It was crucial, for example, that I planned elements of the project such as recruiting participants and the interview structure carefully in a way that did not presume that circumstantial childlessness necessarily involves a sense of loss or grief, since these might not be part of the experience for women who did not choose to see a grief counsellor. I discuss this and other implications of my shift from counsellor to researcher in a consideration of methodology in Chapter 3.

The spectre of essentialism

At this point it is important to raise a key issue relating to biology and reproductive decision-making that has been part of my work as a counsellor with circumstantially childless women, and of my research in this field. One of the difficulties of this project has been finding ways to talk about these issues in a way that avoids pathologizing women’s experiences of circumstantial childlessness. I want to make it clear from the outset that I am not suggesting that all women should have children, are ‘meant’ to have children, or will be unhappy at some level if they do not have children or become mothers, biological or otherwise. Rather I want to acknowledge that women’s reproductive decisions are made in the context of extremely complex social messages around mothering, changing social trends related to economic and career trajectories and delayed marriage or partnering, and of the conscious and unconscious psychological imperatives, desires and fears unique to the individual biography of every woman.

⁴ The phenomenon of ‘circumstantial childlessness’ is one experienced in a context of delayed parenthood by both men and women. There are different implications for women however, who are more likely to be defined in terms of their parental identities, and whose period of biological fertility is more limited than men’s. For this reason, I focus on women’s experiences of the phenomenon in this thesis, but that is not to suggest that men might not also struggle at times with painful feelings of loss about their not having had a child when they expected to do so (see also Letherby 2012).

Infertility in all its forms poses a particular problem for feminist researchers. Thompson (2002, p.52) identifies this difficulty when she writes,

On the one hand, even in an age of decreasing birthrates, voluntary childlessness, and increasing rates of infertility, involuntary childlessness is recognized as one of the greatest forms of unhappiness and loss an adult woman might endure (...) and prominent feminists have long called for it to be taken seriously as a feminist issue (Birke, Himmelweit, & Vines, 1990; Pfeffer & Woollet, 1983; Stolcke, 1986). On the other hand feminists are also interested in disrupting the gendered role expectations and the essentialist connection between motherhood and women's identity that greatly intensify infertile women's suffering.

As I worked with the research material I found myself confronting the spectre of essentialism and the related issue of women's difference, which Patrice DiQuinzio (2012) describes as an "intractable problem" in feminist thinking about motherhood. The false universal that women generally—and mothers in particular—are inherently nurturing in an essential sense has long been the focus of feminist critique. Such generalized notions of women and of the maternal do not take account of the huge diversity of women's lives (Stephens 2011). As a feminist there are particular tensions in research in this field (see Thompson 2002) and I often felt very uncomfortable with the direction my analysis took me in. However, many of the participants identified very strongly as feminist and several commented about feeling conflicted between some of their feminist ideals and the complexities of their lived experience. Julia, for example, who described herself as being "very influenced" by feminist thought, said, "I grew up in the seventies and [second wave] feminism was just starting and I remember at some point—I don't know when it was, in my mid to late 30s—thinking, 'oh, bloody feminism! It never did me any good! Look! I'm childless. Bugger!' You know?"

Her "you know" was an entreaty to me to understand and recognise that, although she continued to position herself as feminist, she perceived that something in that feminist thinking had contributed to her being "childless" now. This recognition sometimes created a painful tension for participants, and in turn for me as researcher. Reading these narratives through a particular feminist lens, many of these women could be construed as advocates for versions of maternalism.⁵ It was important to me to think through that tension as part of the experience of circumstantial childlessness for some women. At times I found it challenging to create a space for attention to the difficulties in these women's experience and at the same wanting to understand, explain, and critique them. There is a range of ways in which feminists have theorized the links between women, mothers, bodies and nurturing, some of which might

⁵ Stephens (2011, p.ix) defines maternalism as "the application of values, usually associated with mothering, to the society as a whole", and notes that maternalist ideas "often provoke unease and antagonism" when raised in a feminist context.

foreclose my thinking around the issues these women raised. I was committed to being as open as I could in my interpretation and analysis of the research materials, even when I felt politically uncomfortable in doing so. I explore these issues further in various ways throughout the thesis.

1.3 Developing the project

This study investigates the issues that arose in the narratives and drawings of 26 circumstantially childless New Zealand women aged between 32 and 45, and in the encounters I had with them. In planning the research project I initially kept my frame wide and exploratory. A review of the academic literature had suggested that there was very little work on this topic, so potentially there were many areas on which to focus.

The topic provides an obvious opportunity to explore the broader social implications of this growing phenomenon at a particular conjunction of social, historical and economic circumstances. It is important to consider the part that social class, education and ethnicity play in women's experience of circumstantial childlessness, for example, since both early and late motherhood are patterned by these factors. How might the experience of 'too late' be understood in the context of a vilification of 'too early' motherhood for many women, and an emphasis on the importance of further education and the development of a career? Related to this are issues concerning the commodification of new reproductive technologies, which arguably are more accessible to middle class older women, and which disrupt the relationship between women's sexed bodies and traditional patterns of reproduction. These are compelling and important implications of this topic that require serious engagement.

As I began to interview participants however, the aspects that intrigued and puzzled me were the ongoing emotional intensity for the women I talked to, and the social misrecognition and silence that appeared to surround it. I wondered why the choice of whether or not to become a mother seemed to be much more loaded than other choices in their lives. After all, the lives of individuals are inevitably strewn with "ghostly lives, destinies that could have been but do not come to pass" (Thomson & McLeod 2009, p.114). Why was it that these women's fantasies of motherhood and a child appeared to be of a different order from the other possible subjectivities that they might have taken up? And what was happening in their social worlds that they felt such a strong sense of isolation, misunderstanding and judgment?

I made a decision to step aside from discussion about why biological childlessness *occurs* in circumstantially childless women's lives, and focused on why being—or not being—a mother

matters to these participants. I became interested in the meaning that having a child and being a mother has for a woman, and hence, what (if anything) is perceived to be lost—or gained—when becoming pregnant, giving birth, and being a parent has not come about. I shifted my focus in this way from a full engagement with the broader social implications of the topic and foregrounded the personal psychic dimensions of participants' experience as they related to issues of fantasy, loss, grieving and adaptation for a number of reasons. These aspects seemed to be key to their experience of circumstantial childlessness and I wanted to research in a way that was experience-near. Secondly, their narratives suggested that these are aspects that are not well recognized or explored socially, and this lack of recognition seemed to be central to the sense of isolation that so many participants spoke about. Lastly, I have worked in the field of loss and grief for almost 30 years. I am particularly interested in understanding the psychosocial experience of non-death losses better. I was excited by the potential for psychoanalytic theory to be brought to bear on that understanding. Choosing this focus built on my existing knowledge and experience, and I felt that I was in a position to make a contribution to new knowledge about both the topic of circumstantial childlessness, and to the field of loss and grief.

Engaging with both the research material I generated and the theoretical literature, I realized that the sense many of these women had of themselves as a mother (and of their potential child or children) developed prior to the considerations they made as young adults about whether and when to have children. Taking that as my starting point, I began to ask how these circumstantially childless women responded when they find themselves approaching or at the end of their fertile years without having had a biological child. Since notions of what it is to be a woman and a mother, and concepts such as loss and grieving, are both social constructs and life experiences that are products of an individual's personal history and biography, I considered what the "mutual imbrications" (Roseneil 2009, p.416) of the psychic and the social in this aspect of these circumstantially childless women's lives might be.⁶ Shifting the focus from the present to a much broader temporal frame, and from reasons to meanings, revealed aspects that potentially added more nuanced detail to my understanding of circumstantial childlessness.

⁶ Exploring the psychosocial dimensions of circumstantial childlessness means that the narratives and drawings generated through this research are analyzed at a conceptual level in a way that would not be possible within a conventional sociological approach that does not take account of unconscious dynamics. I develop my discussion of the psychosocial approach I take in Chapter 3.

1.4 Questions that guide the project

Out of the psychosocial methods I had chosen and the encounters I had with participants, I developed a focus on fantasy and loss, because analysis of these theoretical concepts seemed together to give most insights into this apparently socially unrecognised phenomenon. A brief excerpt from my interview with Deborah illustrates how this shift in focus shaped the direction and commitment of the thesis.

A “sense of myself as a mother”

Deborah had spoken articulately and strongly until the point in the interview at which I asked her to talk about how she felt about the decision she and her husband (whom she met in her mid 30s) made not to have a baby, because of concerns about potential disability:

[It was] incredibly difficult. And is still difficult. [...] It was difficult because [pause] um [pause] I think it was difficult because [pause], I think it was difficult because [long pause] I had never [pause], and in a way still haven't, um, relinquished a, sort of [pause] sense of myself as a mother [trembling, quiet voice, crying]. Um [pause], [it's] very hard to describe.

How I might make meaning of this “a sense of myself as a mother” in psychosocial terms is the starting point for this project. Baraitser (2006, p.22) reflects on being a mother when she writes,

(M)aternity is an experience that I maintain is impossible to anticipate in advance, one that unravels, as it proceeds, and that one is always chasing the tail of, never become expert at, or even competent, and that always eludes our attempts to fully understand it.

If Baraitser is right, and maternity can only be experienced as it is lived, then what *is* this sense of herself as a mother that Deborah experienced *before* becoming a mother, that she struggled to find words for, and that could be identified throughout these women's narratives and drawings? How might this puzzle of a set of women who see themselves as childless, and *yet also* see themselves in some “sense” as mothers, be explained in terms of feminist research in a rationalist age, without recourse to biological, spiritual or essentialist discourses of the ‘natural’ function of women? What might be its social and psychological origins? And, given that a woman becomes a biological mother by virtue of having a child, do these women also have a sense of their potential child or children? If so, in what ways do they ‘know’ that child? How might their “sense” of themselves as a mother be implicated in experiences of other forms of mothering such as adoption or step parenting?

Socially, mothering is still understood to some degree as a norm and a highly desirable ‘rite of passage’ for women, but motherhood has also been understood as a form of patriarchal

oppression; an institution and set of practices that limits women in social, emotional and financial terms. How do these women understand and negotiate the dominant contradictory narratives of female identity in relation to mothering and motherhood?⁷ Throughout the thesis I will predominantly use Melanie Klein's (1935, 1940, 1959) and Donald Winnicott's (1950, 1958, 1963, 1965, 1971) intersubjective theorising in the object relations tradition of psychoanalytic thought, and the radical trans-subjective psychoanalytic work of Bracha Ettinger (1993; 2006; 2006a; 2007; 2010; Pollock 2006) to help me tease out how these circumstantially childless women's sense of themselves as mothers might be understood to originate and develop in the context of a dominant individualism that valorizes notions of autonomy and rational 'choice'.

'Relinquishing'

Deborah's use of the word "relinquish" raised many further questions for this study. What personal and social forces suggest that a circumstantially childless woman should attempt to "relinquish" her "sense of herself as a mother"? What might such a relinquishment entail? Is it possible? That is, what do these women do when their fantasy of mothering is not realized in the birth of a biological child? Why might it be "incredibly difficult" to "relinquish" this sense when a woman is circumstantially childless; what is invested in this fantasy and/or potential subjectivity? How might it be transformed, suspended, defended against, or denied? For some women the process of adjustment to a different-than-expected reality may entail a recognition that biological procreation is not the only way to become a mother or to 'do mothering', for example, or a realization that other subjectivities and possibilities are opened up or remain open to them when they do not bear a child.

'Very hard to describe'

What social and psychic forces might render aspects of the experience of circumstantial childlessness so difficult to make meaning of and talk about? Hollway (2012a, p.23) uses the term 'ineffable' to describe something that is "not readily explicable through language" and "consequently perhaps it feels like it cannot be understood". How might I explain the "ineffable" quality of these women's experience of circumstantial childlessness?

⁷ Since the publication of Rich's (1976) *Of Woman Born* the study of motherhood has been divided into three interconnected themes: as 'institution', 'experience', and 'identity' or 'subjectivity'. In the past ten years however, there has been an increase in mothering literature that discusses motherhood as a site of empowerment and political activism. Recently motherhood as a basis for 'agency' has emerged as a further theme (O'Reilly 2010).

This topic is increasingly explored in a range of ways in the popular media in terms of women ‘leaving it too late’, but these women did not appear to find these ways of articulating their experience adequate or useful in addressing how they feel about being in this position.^{8 9} It is difficult to imagine serious media treatment of their sense of themselves as mothers and the children they did not have. The narratives and drawings of the participants in this research describe the ways that they had difficulties in talking about these issues with others and often felt isolated and excluded, echoing empirical research that suggests that, in societies that privilege parenthood, women (and men) who have not had children represent the ‘other’ (Letherby 2012; Nicholson 2007; Allison, 2010). When women are not readily able to access social support, how might the outcomes of a perceived social silence manifest themselves in the lives of these participants? How is the process of grieving or meaning-making in the context of loss distorted when that loss is not socially acknowledged or validated by others? What part do circumstantially childless women themselves play in constructing and maintaining the silence that they perceived surrounds this topic?

1.5 Theoretical resources and methodological approach

A range of theoretical resources are brought to bear on this analysis. The main structural framework is an object relations one, made primarily through reference to Klein, Winnicott, and Ettinger. Within this overarching object relations framework I also draw on some forms of middle range theory as I discuss particular dimensions of circumstantial childlessness. For example, in Chapter 6 I draw on a range of broader psychosocial theories of loss and grieving, such as Doka’s (1989, 2002) concept of ‘disenfranchised grief’, and Neimeyer’s (2001, 2002) work on meaning-making in grieving. While these theories do not constitute a single theoretical framework, they are not inconsistent, and are commensurate with an object relations approach.

⁸ For example, see Orr 2010, Lang 2009, and Barnett 2010. The difficulties in conceiving a child because of age-related infertility that is a common experience for circumstantially childless women who are trying to become pregnant is reflected in a wide range of media, outside of articles in newspapers and magazines. In November 2010 ASB (one of New Zealand’s four major banks) ran a national advertising campaign that featured an image of a pink plastic hospital identification bracelet with the words “Hope 14/09/11” in the name area. The main text read “I’m ASB special IVF assistance. What better way to help create a future?” Such a campaign reflects the idea that age-related infertility for women who have ‘left it too late’ is an issue that will be commonly recognised and responded to (and one that has financial implications).

⁹ ‘gateway-women.com’, a website developed in the U.K. in the latter stages of my work on this thesis, is a notable exception to more usual media representation of this phenomenon. It was established by Jody Day, herself a circumstantially childless woman, with the aim of “supporting, inspiring and empowering childless-by-circumstance women”.

'Loss' and grieving

Considering the experience of circumstantial childlessness as one that entails a loss has ethical, social and political dimensions. I approach circumstantial childlessness as an experience of loss, but do not assume that this loss is necessarily experienced in a predominantly negative way. My aim is to conceptualize this experience in a way that takes account of the wide range of responses women have to not having had a biological child, and that acknowledges that *something* is lost—and that women may grieve—without collapsing it into a loss that entails being “pathologically bereft” (Eng & Kazanjian 2003 p.5). I do this by conceiving of ‘loss’ in a way that does not have at its core a judgment that it is, in its very nature, adverse. Throughout this thesis I hold an understanding of it that takes account of the inevitable changes and transitions in life and frames them in positive and productive ways, yet still acknowledges an often painful and difficult grieving that is implicit in these transitions (Craib 1994).

Historically literatures in the field of loss and grief have focused almost exclusively on the grief responses of individuals to the loss of a person—or people—associated with death (Thompson 2002), and loss itself is little theorized except as a triggering event for grieving.¹⁰ There is little discussion of non-death losses and, where there is, the findings around bereavement loss are often uncritically applied in a very different circumstance. Within this primarily psychological frame, grief has been constructed as ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ in relation to grieving people’s responses to their loss by creating a narrow view of what might be considered acceptable or ‘healthy’ grieving. Throughout the twentieth century medical metaphors of health, illness, healing and recovery became a dominant way of describing the experiences of grieving people. A quote from Parkes exemplifies this:

Of all the functional mental disorders almost the only one whose cause is known, whose symptomatology is stereotyped and whose outcome is predictable is grief. That grief is a mental disorder there can be no doubt, since it is associated with all the discomfort and loss of function which characterizes such disorders.

(1965, p.1, cited in Marris 1974, p. 27)

¹⁰ In the US, for example, a major review of research into grief and bereavement (Centre for the Advancement of Health 2004, p.498) noted that definitions are debated but in simple terms “bereavement refers to the loss of a loved one by death and grief refers to the distress resulting from bereavement”.

Conceptualising grief as an illness in this way infers the possibility of ‘treatment’ and a ‘cure’, and places it within the sphere of health professionals with specific privileged expertise to ‘heal’, shifting power and autonomy away from grieving people.¹¹

The continued dominance of this cultural framing of grief has important implications for this project. Not surprisingly, women may be reluctant to conceptualize their experience of childlessness as a ‘loss’ and their responses as ‘grief’ (or to tolerate others doing so) if doing so implicates them in a discourse of ‘illness’ or pathology. To do so also formulates their responses to loss as reactive ‘coping’ strategies, limiting their potential to be seen as creative means of adaptation to an unexpectedly changed life trajectory. In Chapter 5 I discuss some theoretical conceptualizations of loss and grieving that entail understandings more productive for this study.¹²

A ‘psychoanalytically-informed’ psychosocial approach (Hollway & Jefferson 2013)

The thesis is grounded methodologically in a growing body of empirical work in the psychosocial tradition that recognizes the contribution made by psychoanalytic concepts to sociological analyses of intimacy and personal life (Clarke 2006).¹³ Psychosocial research using a primarily object relational approach began in the U.K., and continues to develop there as well as elsewhere (Hollway & Jefferson 2013; Roseneil 2012; Walkerdine 2008). It draws on a variety of sometimes conflicting theoretical bases, and comprises a diverse set of methods, but all are premised on a recognition that the motivations that shape individuals’ behaviour are often unconscious, and that there is a complex interrelatedness between social structures and the psychodynamics of biography.

Critiques made of this approach are based on its ontology, and on the epistemologies and ethical dimensions that underpin its methods. Frosh and Baraitser (2008) identified an object

¹¹ While Parkes’ statement may seem extreme and out of touch with contemporary understandings of grief, current debates about how grief is understood and ‘treated’ in the DSM V bring this into question.

¹² Although academic research is slowly changing understandings of grief, my work as a counsellor and grief educator suggests that there is a lag between theoretical work and public perceptions of grieving and the ‘grief process’. Many people still conceive of grief as a linear stage process (Kubler Ross 1969), associated with bereavement following the death of someone close, and ending in ‘acceptance’ and resolution. This dominant view of grieving is not a good ‘fit’ with the very different experience, content and time-frame of the losses associated with circumstantial childlessness, and it is not surprising that some participants did not use the language of grief to describe their experience. It was notable that all of the participants in this study who had undertaken grief education in the course of training (for counselling or psychotherapy for example) and therefore had a wider view of it *did* frame their experience as a ‘loss’ and their responses as ‘grieving’.

¹³ For a useful overview of the development of psychosocial studies in the U.K. which contextualizes the primarily object relations approach I adopt see Walkerdine (2008) “Contextualizing debates about psychosocial studies”. *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* 13, pp. 341-345).

relations approach as one of two main approaches to psychosocial research informed by psychoanalysis in the U.K., and contrasted it with a deconstructive Lacanian approach. The differences between these two approaches have often been expressed in polarising terms (Hollway 2008b; Walkerdine 2008) that tend to mask their complexities and usefulness behind their differences. A polarized account of them also masks their internal complexities. Within the object relations tradition itself there are differences between a Kleinian and a British Independent object relations approach, as exemplified by Winnicott, for example. I find taking a polarized position unhelpful, and attempt instead to take a more productive ‘both-and’—rather than ‘either-or’—position of theoretical synthesizing (Chodorow 1999) in response to these contradictions and tensions. While situating the work primarily within an object relations paradigm, I draw at times on a broader range of psychoanalytic theory in service of my analysis. There are many examples of scholars who choose to position their work in this way; in her exploration of motherhood that theorizes anecdotes and themes from her own experience of being a mother, for example, Baraitser (2009) positions herself primarily within a Lacanian frame, and also draws on a broad range of theory that is not Lacanian.¹⁴

Roseneil (2009, p.412) writes that an object relations-informed psychosocial analysis is concerned “with ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ worlds, personal biography and socio-historical conditions, internal, unconscious conflict and social power relations, and the complex, multitudinous ways in which these are intertwined”. In giving a psychosocial account of these women’s experience of circumstantial childlessness, I am interested in the aspects of participants’ current and historical biographies (both in their families and their wider social worlds), as well as the broader social structures and settings in which they are immersed, and the discourses of femininity and mothering that are available to them as they make sense of their childlessness.

1.6 Research into circumstantial childlessness

Academic research into circumstantial childlessness is surprisingly sparse. It is impossible to establish statistically how many women fall into this specific category of childlessness, but it does appear to be a growing phenomenon in Western countries (Hadfield *et al.* 2007, McAllister & Clarke 1998). In New Zealand, quantitative data from the 2006 census shows that “voluntary childlessness” in women aged 40 (when they have largely completed childbearing) has increased from less than 1 percent of women born in 1936 to almost 10 per

¹⁴ I discuss the strengths, limitations and critiques of an object relations approach further in Chapter 3.

cent of women born in 1965, and indicate that this figure will rise to 25 % for those born in 1975 (Boddington & Didham 2007).¹⁵ This figure includes those who are biologically infertile (presumed ‘involuntarily childless’, though this may itself be inaccurate in some cases) and those who are ‘voluntarily childless’.¹⁶ Within the latter category however, there is no distinction made between those who are childless by decision, and those who feel the “decision was taken for them” (McAllister & Clarke 1998, p.59). McAllister and Clarke have suggested that few women make an early and irrevocable decision to remain childless; rather that choice is an ongoing process that takes place over time, in the context of life events and within relationships. Boddington and Didham’s report on demographic trends in New Zealand suggests that the presumption that these women are voluntarily childless may be “a misnomer”; they may in fact be childless not because they have made a deliberate decision not to have a child, but “as a consequence of other life events” (2007, p.3). In this suggestion there is an implicit acknowledgement of the phenomenon of circumstantial childlessness, but the statistical invisibility of it remains.

Van Balen and Inhorn (2002) suggest that qualitative research into infertility generally has been neglected in social science research for several reasons.¹⁷ Firstly, they note that in Western societies it has often been viewed as a medical issue rather than a social one, thereby limiting the domains in which it is studied. Secondly, they suggest that infertility is a “taboo subject” (2002, p.5), both because of its possible connotations of sensitive issues of sexual ‘problems’ that are difficult to address in the research context, and also because issues surrounding feminist critiques of essentializing notions of motherhood as a woman’s sole purpose in life mean that feminist researchers are unwilling to appear committed to research that may appear to be grounded in these notions (clearly, other researchers have had the same concerns that I have at times around these issues). They also argue that, since the 1980s, infertility has most often been discussed in philosophical rather than empirical terms as a critique of new reproductive technologies, and that as a result, much of it is “highly

¹⁵ It is striking that in these official data related to demographic trends ‘childlessness’ is synonymous with ‘biological childlessness’; that is social motherhood such as adoption or step-parenting is not acknowledged, and such women are statistically considered to be ‘childless’. Several of the participants in this research who cared for step-children called attention to this social invisibility of their mothering work.

¹⁶ Estimates of natural fertility vary but Boddington and Didham (2007, p.1) cite Australian statistics that claim it is “generally accepted” that around seven per cent of women remain childless because of (biological) infertility problems.

¹⁷ Definitions of the terms ‘infertility’ and ‘voluntary childlessness’ are debated (Letherby 1999). I use these terms in the sense that Van Balen and Inhorn (2002, p.11, italics in original) describe, where ‘infertility’ is “the *process* of not being able to have children” and ‘involuntary childlessness’ is “the final *state or condition* resulting from infertility”.

speculative, polemical, and even somewhat dismissive of an individual's legitimate desires and experiences" (2002, p.6).

Their explanations for the "scholarly lacuna" (2002, p.4) in this field make sense of the limited amount of qualitative research in the specific area of circumstantial childlessness, given its growing occurrence. Two studies however—both PhD theses—are exceptions. Leslie Cannold (2000), who appears to be the first to use the term 'circumstantial childlessness', addresses it specifically from a sociological perspective in both her thesis and a later book (Cannold 2005).

Cannold argues that a complete understanding of the phenomenon of fertile childlessness requires the recognition of circumstantial as well as chosen childlessness. In her small-scale qualitative study she interviewed 31 Australian and four North American women aged between 28 and 43 who had not had children.¹⁸ A key area of concern for Cannold was whether participants in her study described their childlessness as "chosen" and, if so, whether their description of their path was a good fit with everyday understandings of 'choice'.

The circumstantially childless women in Cannold's study were divided into three sub-categories: those who were "childless by relationship", who wanted to have children but whose partners were unwilling to do so; "thwarted mothers" who had not found a partner or who were "struggling" with (often age-related) infertility; and "waiters and watchers" who were ambivalent and undecided and so were particularly susceptible to the choices of partners or the childbearing experiences of friends.¹⁹

Cannold conceptualizes women's reproductive decisions in terms of their "freedom to mother" being curtailed by three issues: an "inability to partner successfully"; the incompatibility of women's employment needs and desires with their motherhood ideals; and a prevailing discourse of childrearing being an "irrational choice" in a context where "self-directed libertarian/consumer values" are dominant. Focussing mainly on the last of these points in her thesis, she writes:

¹⁸ Cannold notes that she had initially planned to interview more women who were circumstantially childless, but was unable to recruit such participants because they found the subject "too raw". Eventually she was able to recruit only two women of the 36 in her sample for whom childlessness was a "sensitive issue". As a result, she resorted to interviewing younger women who were willing to talk about their childlessness because there was still hope for them to go on to have a child. Though I had more success in finding women who were willing to talk to me about their childlessness, I too became aware of this difficulty, as I discuss in Chapter 3. It speaks both to the intensity of the grief many circumstantially childless women feel, and the disenfranchised nature of that grief, which I explore in Chapter 5.

¹⁹ By 'age-related infertility' I refer to infertility that is an outcome of fertility postponement (Swewczuk 2011).

Reasons for becoming a mother, to express and confirm adult feminine identity, to hold a relationship together and/or to create or strengthen family bonds, have lost their social currency and new normative reasons for parenting have failed to take their place. Instead, the data suggest that in the face of women's increasing realisation that their values and identity as modern-day women are in direct conflict with the maternal values and identity, some women are concluding that motherhood is an irrational choice to make.

(Cannold 2000, p.449)

Despite their belief that motherhood was an irrational choice, many of Cannold's participants "still felt a desire to mother and intended to act on that desire", but she argues (2000, p.454) that "the absence of socially endorsed 'rational' reasons to choose parenthood may contribute to some women's decisions to delay or avoid motherhood".

Cannold (2000, pp.449-50) writes that "the content, durability and stability of their imagined futures and identities—as mothers or childless women determines both the existence and strength of their desire to mother", but she does not explore the content or construction of these "imagined" futures and identities in great depth. I understand them to be the conscious aspect of what Deborah called her "sense of myself as a mother"; their fantasies of maternity, which I explore in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

On the basis of her data, Cannold challenges assertions that Australia and North American societies are 'pro-natalist'. Rather, her subjects saw childlessness and motherhood as options with equivalent social standing, and she attributes this to the influence of second-wave feminism. She argues however that "it is imperative that feminists recognise the phenomenon of circumstantial childlessness, differentiating it from childlessness resulting from choice and from infertility". She is concerned that constraints on women's reproductive freedom to have children should be of equal concern to the feminist agenda as the constraints on them so do so, "regardless of whether the outcomes of such constraints are forced motherhood or forced childlessness" (2002, p.468). While I consider her rhetoric here a little dramatic, I see her work as contributing to contemporary feminist dialogue on motherhood.

Cannold's work is useful for this study in identifying the phenomenon of circumstantial childlessness and distinguishing it as a category of fertile childlessness that is different from chosen childlessness, but her aims and methods were very different from mine. Zanobini's (2009) doctoral thesis is closer to the themes I address. She looked at the experience of six childless American women in their early/mid 50s through the lens of Levinson's (1996) concept of a 'Dream'. Her aim was to ascertain whether young adult women's having a 'Dream' of having children had any impact on whether or not they remained childless.

Levinson's concept of a 'Dream' is a theory of adult development based on the idea that people in their late adolescence and young adulthood usually create an image of themselves projected into the future (Zanobini 2009). Conceptually it appears to be somewhat outdated in its notion of gender roles, but Zanobini's study, while limited in scope, nevertheless makes a useful contribution to the field of circumstantial childlessness. She found that participants' ambivalence about having children had resulted in only two participants having had a 'Dream' of having children. All six women in her study had come from families whose mothers (or fathers) were conflicted about having children, and several participants had been responsible for siblings as children themselves.

Loss and a sense of abandonment was a dominant feature in the lives of all of Zanobini's participants. Although it was not the focus of her work, she concluded that family of origin issues may have contributed to participants' ambivalence, and that they may have made "an unconscious choice not to have children" (2009, p.118). Her close focus on the concept of a 'Dream', framed in Levinson's terms constrained Zanobini in exploring these themes further, and the very small scale and theoretical scope of her work limited its usefulness. Using a psychosocial framework that extends beyond the conventional psychological one that Zanobini used, I have greater theoretical resources to explore these issues.

Although not specifically addressing 'circumstantial childlessness' the phenomenon is also partially approached in research that looks at the experience of medical infertility (e.g. Becker & Nachtigall 1994; Cussins 1998; Greil *et al* 2010; Inhorn & Van Balen 2002; Letherby 2012; Thompson 2002; Whiteford & Gonzales 1994). There are important overlaps with the experience of women who are biologically incapable of bearing a child, particularly in terms of their grief in not becoming parents. The key difference is that, for the participants in this study, as far as they knew they were (or had been) biologically capable of conceiving children. This raised important different issues of 'choice', since medically infertile women are more likely to feel that the choice has been taken from them. Literatures that address voluntary childlessness (e.g. Kelly 2009; Bartlett 1994; Cameron 1997; Gillespie 2000; Majumdar 1999) also have an oblique overlap with this research. For example, some women in this study drew on discourses of the advantages of childlessness when they found themselves in that situation, but they appeared to do so as compensation for their regret at not being mothers, rather than a reason.

1.7 Aims of the study

This aspect of childlessness is little researched and there appear to be limited social narratives about the experience of apparently fertile women who experience childlessness for social reasons, at a time when their biological fertility is declining or it is no longer possible for them to conceive. The overall intention of this thesis is to explore the contours of these women's experience of circumstantial childlessness as a psychosocial phenomenon, through a close analysis of the ways they co-construct it in their talk with me and others and their drawings about it. I aim to increase understanding of the experience of circumstantial childlessness and in doing so to contribute to the possibility of a more diverse set of maternal narratives for women.

Within that, arising out of my focus on fantasy and loss the research has three aims:

1. To explore how these women articulate their experience of circumstantial childlessness in words and drawings.
2. To theorize the relationship between fantasies of motherhood and a child (or children) and their impact on the day-to-day lives of these women.
3. To conceptualize the relationships between fantasy, loss, grieving, and agency in their experience of circumstantial childlessness.

1.8 The structure of the thesis

In this chapter I have used an extract from Deborah's interview to introduce the questions that guide the aims of the thesis. I carry this through as a structural device, to sustain attention to the narratives of the women I interviewed and to link different elements of the thesis together. Extracts from her research materials are used to introduce the analytical chapters and the concluding chapter. My intention in analyzing the data and writing the thesis has been to stay very close to the research materials, and to foreground women's narratives and drawings. I have tried to achieve a balance between a descriptive and compassionate account of the data and an experience-near theorization (Hollway 2009) that does not detract from their personal

significance for individuals, but provides means for developing more nuanced understandings about women's circumstantial childlessness.²⁰

In this introduction I have described how my initial broad interest in this topic gradually narrowed to a concern with the meanings that becoming a mother has for the participants in this study. I have introduced the idea that many of these circumstantially childless women articulate a "sense" of themselves as a mother in various ways; a fantasy of themselves in relation with a child or children that begins long before their reproductive decision-making as young women. I have signaled my interest in exploring what the roots of that "sense" might be, and what happens to it when the maternal subjectivity they have envisaged does not eventuate.

Chapter 2: Contextualizing fantasy, loss and grieving

In Chapter 2 I develop this idea of "the sense of myself as a mother", and set it within a framework of a set of first and second order theoretical structures. I begin with a discussion of the ontological bases of the object relations psychoanalytically-informed psychosocial approach I adopt. I focus on participants' fantasies of maternity and a child and explore how fantasy is understood within this approach; at 'where', and 'how'—psychically speaking—circumstantially childless women's fantasies of maternity and a child, and the meanings that becoming a mother holds for them, might be understood to develop. I consider this primarily through the work of the psychoanalyst and paediatrician Donald Winnicott, and that of feminist psychoanalyst and artist, Bracha Ettinger.

These participants' conscious and unconscious reproductive decisions are or were made in the context of the broad changes in expectations for women's lives in Western countries brought about in part by the impact of second wave feminism. Their individual fantasies of maternity and a child are also constructed and maintained through their interactions with the broad social and cultural context in which they have been immersed as they grew into adulthood. I introduce the concept of individualization and the ways it relates to the desirable "success-story narrative" (Thomson *et al.* 2011) of contemporary young women's lives.

When Deborah spoke of her "sense of myself as a mother", and other participants talked about the ways they 'saw' themselves in relationship with a child, the dominant quality of this

²⁰ Hollway (2009, p.2) describes an 'experience-near' theorization as one that focuses on "the experiences of subjects who suffer and who care, and on psychological resilience and damage, in the particularities of the settings, past, present and anticipated future, as people engage with and make meaning out of their situations and actions".

“sense” in their fantasies of maternity and a child was ‘nurturing’. In Chapter 2 I discuss the notion of ‘nurturing’ and the ways it has been conflated in essentialising ways with understandings of what it is to be a woman. I explore ways of theorizing these participants’ fantasies of nurturing that avoid this.

Lastly in this chapter I outline the ways of theoretically framing the experience of grief and adaptation that I explore and illustrate in the analytical chapters that follow.

Chapter 3: “(T)hings that slip and slide”

Methodology is an important aspect of this thesis, and one in which it makes a contribution to the tools available for qualitative researchers. The psychosocial methodology I have chosen informs its ontology, its epistemology and its methods and is also related to the ethical decisions I have made in it (Hollway 2008a). In Chapter 3 I discuss some of the key debates around this methodology and the methods associated with it. I outline what I understand to be the nature of the human subject of this kind of research and explore issues of “what can be known and how?” (Doucet & Mauthner 2008).

As someone who came to the research process via a career in counselling I have a particular interest in the limitations of text-based methods to ‘capture’ what John Law (2004, p.2) describes as “the things that slip and slide”. This is particularly pertinent with a topic like this, where ephemeral and potentially unspeakable issues of fantasy and loss are central. In my work as a counsellor I am accustomed to paying attention to different ways of ‘knowing’—to silences, laughs, unexpected links, tears, and sighs for example—and to my own responses to the person speaking to me. Conventional research provides me with a wide range of tools to analyze the words that participants speak in an interview setting, but I consider the aspects of these women’s experience that seem to evade available discourses and make themselves known through non-linguistic expressions such as these to be equally important, although more difficult to address in a research context. I used two strategies to address these difficult elements of ‘voice’ in the research materials: a notation system based in Bollas’s (2007) idea of speech as a symphonic score, and a participant-produced drawing method designed to access a different means of expression. In this chapter, I further describe the combination of approaches I developed and used to collect and analyze these research materials. I conclude the chapter by illustrating these themes and methods through attention to some aspects of the research materials associated with Lynn, one of the circumstantially childless women who both spoke and drew about her experiences and their meanings for her.

Chapter 4: Maternal fantasies and the 'absent presence' of unborn children

Chapter 4 is the first of three analytical chapters in the thesis. I discuss how these women's fantasies of themselves as a mother—and the children they envisaged themselves having—were evident in their talk and drawings. My analysis of the research materials will show that they had very detailed, complex, ambivalent and sometimes contradictory fantasies that were often tangled in turn with their own mothers' fantasies. Participants' fantasies were idiosyncratic, but revolved around some common themes. I will explore how they talked about maternity as being a transformative way to 'unselfishly' nurture others, and a means to belonging in a uniquely durable relationship.

I will further illustrate the key themes of the chapter with a close focus on the research materials associated with Maree. Her story was one of perceived conflict between living an autonomous individualized life in pursuit of her "life purpose", and her—at times intense—longing to have a child. Her drawing captured this vividly. Her interview was threaded through with a sense of mystery for her; she found it difficult to articulate the inexplicable, apparently irrational "maternal thing" that she perceived to have come to her after she became unexpectedly pregnant and had an abortion. Her narrative also emphasizes the importance of 'nurturing', and the part it plays in her maternal fantasies.

Chapter 5: Loss and grieving in the experience of circumstantial childlessness

Writing in the context of the loss of home, family and community experienced by children who had been evacuated to Oxfordshire during World War II, Clare Winnicott noted, "(t)o feel a sense of loss implies that something of value, something loved, is lost, otherwise there would be no loss" (cited in Kantner, J.(Ed.) 2004, p. 71). Her suggestion that the 'lost' thing may be a loved "something" rather than a 'someone' is helpful for my purposes, as is the possibility (given her context) that it may be lost by some means other than death. But embedded within it—and indeed within the broad range of literatures on loss—is a strong sense of the material implicit in the consideration of what is 'lost'; the idea that loss inevitably entails one not now 'having' something one once 'had'.²¹

It is against this background that I will discuss how these women talked and drew about *what* they experienced to be lost when they did not go on to become biological mothers as they had

²¹ This is implied even in work that encompasses the loss of an ideal such as 'freedom' or 'hope'. In her consideration of the violence that has emerged in response to loss post-September 11, 2001 for example, Judith Butler (2004, p.20) writes, "(I)f we have lost, then it follows that we have had".

expected. For them the material outcome of the loss is not that life changes, but that it potentially stays the same; the loss is not of the past, but of a possible future, and there is no loss event, nor lost object in a material sense. Temporally, the usual conception of grief is from a standpoint of the present, imagining (and grieving for) aspects of the past. Here I shift the temporal dimension of loss; women who experience circumstantial childlessness as a loss, and grieve for it, might be understood to be grieving for the loss of the embodiment of their maternal fantasies in a potential future, but actively experiencing and responding to this loss as part of their lived experience in the present.

I understand loss as having a quality of folding in on itself, creating a loss-within-a-loss. Although the loss of their realization of maternal fantasies may exist for all of these women, the meaning they ascribe to that loss is idiosyncratic. Envisaging loss in this way makes it possible to take account of the range of responses women have to not having had a biological child because their experience lies in the particular meanings that being a mother has for each woman. I conclude the chapter with a close study of the research materials associated with Julia, who was explicit about her losses and chose very active ways to respond to them.

Chapter 6: Being ‘maternal’

It might be expected that these women’s fantasies of maternity and a child would peter out as time passed. For many of the circumstantially childless women in this study however, this is not what happened. In this final analytic chapter I will consider ‘what remains’; what becomes of these women’s fantasies of maternity when the opportunity to embody them has passed. I use women’s stories to illustrate the varied ways in which many of these participants talked about adapting the aspects of their maternal fantasies that carry particular meaning for them, and embodying them in different ways in their lives. For many participants, there was a felt sense that others judged them for not being mothers.

Many of the older participants spoke of how adapting their maternal fantasies in this way was fulfilling for them. At the same time, as I illustrate in this chapter, there remained *something*; a yearning that participants found difficult to articulate. I will draw further on Ettinger’s matrixial theory to theorize about this sense of yearning.

Chapter 7: A “narratable” life

The psychosocial methodology I have chosen pushes me to encouraging certain forms of talk and representation of experience that has provided insights—both for the women I interviewed and for me as a researcher. These insights tend to be linked to ways of being and

thinking that are sometimes not immediately accessible in everyday talk. In using these methods I have co-produced, with the participants of the study, research materials that are rich, varied, complex and nuanced. In the concluding chapter, I explore the relationships between the three central themes of fantasy, loss/grief and adaptation in the experience of circumstantial childlessness, as they are articulated in these materials. I reflect on the methods I used and bring together my analysis in the light of my aims for the study, as discussed in this introductory chapter.

Chapter 2: Contextualizing fantasy, loss and grief

Motherhood begins internally in the conflictual, intense cauldron of childhood sexuality and object relations, and is overdetermined, filled with fantasy, and complex: any woman's desire for children, whether immediately fulfilled, fulfilled belatedly, or never fulfilled, contains layers of affect and meaning.

(Chodorow 2003, p.1184)

2.1 Introduction

In my introductory chapter I described how my initial interest in the topic of circumstantial childlessness became progressively refined to crystallize into a consideration of what “the sense of myself as a mother” and the fantasies of a child (or children) might mean to circumstantially childless women. I indicated my intention to explore the relationship between these maternal fantasies and what happens when an expected, hoped-for, and presumed possible biological maternity does not ensue.

An essentialist evolutionary ‘natural’ stance is often presumed in popular contexts when the question of why women desire children arises. There is often a naturalized assumption—implied in the term ‘body/biological clock’ for example—that women want to have children because they are designed by evolution to do so in order to assure the continuation of the species (Franklin 1990; Irvine 2007). At other times, or in other places, essentialist assumptions or a religious basis would be invoked. In this thesis I move beyond these to draw on a range of theoretical literatures that explore the place of maternity in contemporary women's lives. Feminist literatures have explored this field in many and diverse ways (Baraitser 2009), but my focus is narrowed to a consideration—through the experience of its absence—of the meanings that the anticipation of being a mother holds for the women I interviewed.

There are particular difficulties inherent in researching and articulating an *absence*. Frers (2013, p.434) writes:

When I orient myself towards a person that is not there, then I feel that this person does *not* fill the space that I want or expect them to fill. Since they are not there, I experience a void, a lack of presence, a lack of sensual connection or resistance. It is this void that I myself then fill with my own emotions and imaginations.

In mapping the contours of a relationship between the women in this study and both their maternal subjectivity (which exists in potential rather than in embodied reality) and their fantasy of a child(ren) (which is not embodied, but has been or is anticipated), I find the fine

arts concept of ‘negative space’ to be a useful way to encapsulate both these difficulties and their potential. Negative space is the space that is created around or between the subjects of an image or shape. Sculptor Henry Moore described the holes in his work as being as important—as a shape—as the material that surrounded it. Rather than being understood as the empty absence of something, ‘negative space’ is potently full of meaning. One participant, Kim, alluded to this idea when she described motherhood as “present as an absence” for childless women. The metaphor of negative space is useful as a way of focusing my attention on what meaning-presence might fill the space of apparent absence in these circumstantially childless women’s lives. This is the “void” that Frers refers to, and it may be filled with particular fantasies of a child and of being a mother; with what Deborah described as her “sense of myself as a mother”.

In this chapter I will outline the theoretical framework that I use as I build my argument about these fantasies in subsequent chapters. The structure of the chapter foreshadows the structure of the thesis as a whole. I begin with a discussion of the ontological basis of the psychosocial methodology I employ, the implementation of which I will further explain in Chapter 3. Next I outline the theoretical underpinnings of the development, presence and potency of fantasies of maternity that I will discuss in Chapter 4. Finally, I address theories of mourning that underpin my discussion of the loss of the embodiment of these fantasies and the grieving women do for that loss that I address in Chapter 5, and the adaptations these women make to those losses that I explore in Chapter 6.

2.2 A ‘psychoanalytically-informed’ psychosocial approach (Hollway & Jefferson 2013)

In this thesis I draw ontologically on a range of theoretical resources, many of which are explicitly informed by object relations psychoanalytic theories (which I discuss further below), and others that I consider to be commensurate with these. The psychosocial approach that I adopt emphasises the part that the effects of psychic conflict and unconscious dynamics play in the day-to-day lives of individuals, and situates their relations with others (in both ‘internal’ and ‘external’ worlds) in the social settings in which they live (Hollway 2008a). Psychosocial research disrupts the presumed dualism between ‘social’ and ‘psychic’ in individuals’ lives; these are understood to be inseparable, but not reducible to one another. Roseneil (2006, p.866) writes that a psychosocial approach addresses “emotions which are hard to articulate in discourse”, and explores “tensions, contradictions and unconscious meanings within the context of individual biography”. These factors make this approach particularly well suited to the aims of this project.

Employing psychoanalytic theory in social science research

A key reason for choosing a psychosocial approach for this project is that psychoanalytic theory has the capacity to inform and enhance analysis of empirical data because of its emphasis on the importance of the dynamic unconscious (Wengraf & Froggett 2004).²² Given my aim of better understanding the part that the fantasy of themselves as a mother plays in these participants' experience of circumstantial childlessness, it was important that I employed a methodology that has the capacity to account for these aspects of individuals' lives. Clarke (2006, p.1166) writes that this approach:

(r)ecognizes the role of the human imagination in the construction of identity in those notions that are so important to us, notions of home and community. It recognizes that it matters little if these things are more often imagined than real because people attach meaning to what they believe to make sense of their lives.

There is, however, critical concern about the legitimacy of using psychoanalytic theories and methods outside the clinical setting (Frosh 2010). Frosh and Baraitser (2008, p.363), for example, write that when it is “mined for its technology” there is a danger that psychoanalysis will be “used as an ungrounded expert system of knowledge”. Reflecting on this concern, Hollway and Jefferson (2013, p.150) developed the term ‘psychoanalytically-informed’ methods and concepts to distinguish their use of terms such as interpretation and transference—which were originally developed in a psychoanalytic clinical context—outside the clinical setting in social science research.

I consider the use of these ‘technologies’, to use Frosh and Baraitser’s term, to be valid in the research context. I argue that the idea of an unconscious dimension to our lives, and concepts such as identification, projection and introjection, transference and countertransference (albeit not always named as such) are part of both popular understanding and the ways that psychoanalytic concepts have migrated out of the clinic into popular culture and use.²³ Parker (2010, p.17) described this “surreptitious infiltration” as a problem. The question for me is not whether or not it is appropriate to engage such concepts in empirical research, but rather how to do so consistently and ethically. Baraitser (2008, p.426) writes that “(t)he task is to find a ‘kinship’ between what is specific to the clinic and what is produced ‘not everywhere’ but in

²² Redman (2005, p.34) describes the ‘dynamic unconscious’ as “an inherent aspect of human being [which] accompanies the individual’s every interaction with the external world and is the medium through which this is experienced”.

²³ Bondi (2003, p.325) argues similarly, noting that psychoanalytic theory has developed outside as well as inside the clinic. She cites Mulvey’s (1988) work in film theory, and “theoretical-and-popular-and-practical” books that offer a psychoanalytic perspective on everyday life. Orbach’s *Bodies* (2009) and Phillips’ (2005) *Going Sane*, are good examples of this kind of work, and his *Missing Out: In praise of the un-lived life* (2012) is one that has particular salience for this project.

some specific places beyond”. She advocates that the researcher develops “a ‘psychoanalytic sensibility’; a way of working with human participants that instigates a constant re-working of the knowledge bases that we come with”.

2.3 Conceptualising the ‘self’

Concepts of ‘the self’ are complex and variously understood within psychoanalytically-informed psychosocial ontologies. Consistent with the object relations approach I take, I use it in the sense of an historical, psychic and social construct that is not conceptualized as a stable, consistent and unitary entity which exists within a person, but which rather exists in and through relationships with other people. While I understand this subject to be in part constituted socially through discourse, I also consider a prediscursive dimension to its constitution. I agree with Hoggett (2008, p.381), who writes:

(F)ar from being constituted by discourse, the subject is first and foremost a site of sensuous experiences originating from both within and outside the body, experiences that are first manifested affectively and that only later may (or may not be) registered discursively.

This prediscursive dimension forms one of the ways in which I will theorize how the women in this study develop “the sense of myself as a mother”, and I discuss it further in relation to Ettinger’s theory of the ‘matrixial’ in section 2.5 of this chapter.²⁴

From a psychosocial perspective the subjects of this research are understood to be “messily complex human subjects shot through with anxiety and self-doubt, conflictual feelings and unruly desires” (Gadd & Jefferson 2007, p.1), whose multiple selves and identities develop and exist interactively in relationship with ‘others’ who are both conscious and unconscious. I understand these women’s lives to be a product both of their idiosyncratic psychic development through those relationships, and of the structures, phenomena, constraints and opportunities of their shared social world. Seen in this way, these individuals are necessarily conflicted subjects who are motivated to defend themselves against knowledge of painful aspects of themselves. From this perspective, the accounts these participants give of their lives are not understood to be a transparent window into some kind of ‘truth’ of who they are. Rather, I see both the interviews I co-constructed with each of these women and the drawings they made to be two of many possible accounts of a life, and the way each participant constructed that account in relationship with me and the other participants to tell me

²⁴ It also has important implications for research methods, since social science research has conventionally primarily analyzed spoken language. I discuss the methods I have adopted and developed to attend to this pre-verbal, or in-addition-to-verbal dimension, in Chapter 3.

something about her idiosyncratic experience of circumstantial childlessness (Hollway & Jefferson 2013).

Narrative construction of the self

Within the overarching psychosocial approach I adopt in this study I have used narrative methods to elicit and analyze the research materials, as I discuss in Chapter 3. Narrative theorists take a range of ontological positions *vis a vis* the extent to which the individual is given primacy over the social in the development of the self, and these have given rise to a corresponding range of understandings of what narrative identities and selves are and how they should be studied (Smith & Sparkes, 2008). Related to this is a debate around the construction of identity. Redman (2005, pp.27-28) writes that this debate concerns:

(t)he extent to which we are ‘spoken’ by narratives (the claim that identities are in some sense *fabricated* by and in narratives); and the extent to which we ‘speak’ them (the claim that we have inherent capacities, such as a dynamic unconscious, that precede any identity-building work that narrative might do).

Contemporary thinking around narrativity assumes the production of subjectivities through narrative that is not inconsistent with the psychosocial theorising I employ. I understand the narratives people tell to have both conscious and unconscious features and meanings, and the presentation, structure and form of these stories to be vehicles through which these meanings are expressed. The position I take is that these stories are one means that people have of constructing their identities for themselves and others, and of making meaning in their lives (Berger & Quinney, 2005). In parallel with the ontological status of the psychosocial subject I see these “private constructions of identity” (Riessman 2008, p.10) as products of the intersection of individuals, who bring to their unique psychobiography to this construction, the constraints and possibilities of the social spaces they inhabit, and the societies they live in (Laslett, 1998). Thinking of their narratives in this way makes it possible to consider the ways in which these women take an active role in appropriating, resisting and extending personal and public narratives of femininity and motherhood, and also the ways in which their “anxiety and self-doubt, conflictual feelings and unruly desires” (Gadd & Jefferson 2007, p.1) might be entangled in these processes.

2.4 Theorising ‘the unconscious’

The theoretical resources from the object relations tradition of psychoanalytic thought that frame the thesis originated in the work of Melanie Klein (1935/1986, 1940/1986), whose work explored the complex relationship between fantasy and Freud’s earlier concept of inner

reality. Unlike Freud, Klein worked with very young children using play therapy, and through her fascination with the contents of their anxieties—revealed both in their play and spoken language—she developed a systematic theory of the structure of the unconscious, as an internal world of fantasy objects (Ogden 2002; Winnicott 1958).

The ‘unconscious’ is conceptualized in varying ways depending on the psychoanalytic tradition in which it is grounded.²⁵ Hinshelwood (1991, p.467) describes a Kleinian view of the unconscious as “structured like a small society” in the sense that it is a “mesh of relationships between objects”. Fakhry Davids (2002, p.67) describes these fantasy objects as being made up of “the self and other internal objects—persons, things, ideas and values that matter to us”. This conceptualization of the unconscious foregrounds the part that fantasy plays in the ways individuals perceive and interact with the world and the people in their lives. Klein conceptualized ‘phantasy’ as a complex interaction between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ experience in which the baby in fantasy takes in—in-corporates—people and objects in her or his world.²⁶ She described this interaction in this way:

(t)he baby, having incorporated his parents, feels them to be live people inside his body in the concrete way in which deep unconscious phantasies are experienced—they are, in his mind, ‘internal’ or ‘inner’ objects, as I have termed them. Thus an inner world is being built up in the child’s unconscious mind, corresponding to his actual experiences and the impression he gains from people and the external world, and *yet altered* by his own phantasies and impulses.

(Klein 1940/1986, p.148)

As well as these objects relating to one another, there is a constant interplay between the internal object world and the individual’s experience of the world of external objects and experiences. These processes, through which a baby first creates and then maintains this inner world, begin in infancy but continue as that individual’s way of relating to the world throughout life. Klein (1959/1975, p.249) wrote that even in adults “the judgement of [external] reality is never quite free from the influence of his internal world”. The mechanism of this linkage between the individual’s ‘outer’ world and the fantasies of her ‘inner’ world is

²⁵ Critics of the object relations approach suggest that researchers who draw on a Kleinian paradigm assume “the presence of a permanent real unconscious” which is sought by the analyst in order “to make sense of otherwise meaningless activity” (Frosh & Baraitser 2008, p.355); a “pre-existing grid that can be drawn on to find the defended subject and trace his or her manoeuvres when faced with the anxiety that undoubtedly pervades everything” (2008, p.358). From a Lacanian perspective the unconscious is not understood as an ‘inner world’, but rather something that is ‘left over’ in language. This difference has important implications for the use of psychoanalytic insights in the research context.

²⁶ The spelling of phantasy/fantasy is variable. As I go on to explain, Klein used the different forms of spelling to differentiate between two meanings of the word. Winnicott spelled both forms with an ‘f’, without explanation. I have found it difficult to know how to handle the issue of the spelling of phantasy/fantasy in this work, since the fantasies/phantasies of maternity that I discuss have both conscious and unconscious dimensions and I have found the distinction difficult to maintain in practice when my discussion moves between these. For ease of reading, I have decided to use fantasy spelled with an ‘f’ throughout. In doing so it is not my intention to gloss over the distinction Klein made between them.

important, but it is sometimes difficult to conceptualize. Hinshelwood (1991, pp. 467-8) described how ‘inner’ fantasies develop in relation to somatic experiences originating outside the body for a baby in this way:

(A) somatic sensation tugs along with it a mental experience of a relationship with an object that causes the sensation, is believed to be motivated to cause the sensation and is loved or hated by the ego according to whether the sensation is pleasant or unpleasant. In this way a sensation that hurts becomes a mental representation of a relationship with a ‘bad’ object that is intending to hurt or damage the ego.

This linkage is an important aspect of the theoretical framework for my argument because it creates a way to think about how a woman’s experiences of being mothered when she was a baby, the unconscious “mesh” of fantasies that developed out of those experiences, and the psychic defence mechanisms and desires that she creates in response to them might be inextricably bound together with her later development of a fantasy of being a mother in relationship with a baby or older child, and with her conscious and unconscious responses and actions as an adult making reproductive choices. An object relations approach is particularly useful in this respect because it articulates how the mutual influence of intra-psychic and social worlds, which is key to a psychosocial account, operates in the lives of individuals.

As Hinshelwood suggests, Klein understood these fantasy objects to be unconsciously felt by a child as benign or malevolent. From this perspective the ‘malevolent’ contents of the unconscious—or the fear of the loss of the ‘good’ objects—are often painful and frightening. Klein theorized that in what she termed the ‘paranoid schizoid’ position an individual creates a range of defences which she termed ‘manic defences’ to avoid feeling that pain—denial, splitting, repression, rejection, and projective identification for example—and that as a child grows into an adult he or she develops sophisticated defence mechanisms that are based on these early responses. Taking these concepts into the research context this creates the notion of the ‘defended’ subject and researcher, whose interactions in the research context are inevitably filtered through the idiosyncratic defences that they have developed throughout their lifetimes.

Conceptualising phantasy/fantasy psychoanalytically

Fantasy is central to the object relations structuring of the unconscious and hence to the defences against the conflicts that arise in it. Balint (1987, p.95) writes that Klein distinguished between ‘phantasy’ as an unconscious structure and ‘fantasy’ as a conscious one in her written work in this way: “(F)antasy spelt with an ‘f’ and imagination arise out of the ability to perceive external reality and identify with it, and play with it; and unconscious

phantasy arises out of the instinctual life which needs to become conscious before it can be played with”.

Winnicott, whose theoretical work I draw on extensively in this thesis, used the concept of fantasy slightly differently.²⁷ For him fantasy was “more primary than reality” (Winnicott 1955/1964, p.153). Rather than setting ‘fantasy’ in opposition to ‘reality’ he theorized fantasy or “illusion” to be an essential route *to* reality; for him, fantasy was not a substitute for reality but the first method of finding it (Phillips, 2007, p.84). He described, for example, how a hungry infant fantasizes a satisfying breast and her mother, who is sensitive to her needs, supplies it, giving the infant the illusion that she has created it. This Winnicottian understanding of fantasy relates to Klein’s notion of internal reality; he described it as “the fantasy that is personal and organized, and related historically to the physical experiences, excitements, pleasures and pains of infancy” (Winnicott 1958, p.130). These are the elements of fantasy that are involved in the intersubjective and trans-subjective processes between a baby and her mother that I discuss further below.

Winnicott also distinguished a second type of fantasy, which he described as ‘fantasying’. Fantasying—which he related to daydreaming in childhood—was a way in which both children and adults insulate themselves from the pain of their internal reality; from real contact with themselves and others. Fantasying, for Winnicott, is a form of disassociation which has a stultifying effect, “absorbing energy but not contributing-in either to dreaming or to living” (Winnicott 1971, p.27). Phillips (2007, p.59) describes Winnicott’s view of fantasying as “a solution at the cost of personal integrity”.

Winnicott’s ‘Transitional Space’

A further aspect of Winnicott’s theorization of fantasy which has particular salience for this project are his concepts of ‘transitional phenomena’ and the ‘transitional space’, which developed out of his observation of children playing. He conceived an infant at birth as being totally undifferentiated from his or her mother psychically.²⁸ The baby moves from a position of understanding her or his mother (and the food and comfort she provides) as subjectively conceived to a gradual awareness that she is separate from her or him, and, with this, a growing perception of ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ realities develops. When the mother proves to be

²⁷ Donald Winnicott was a British object relations psychoanalyst and paediatrician whose psychoanalytic theorising was initially based in Klein and Freud’s theories, but who radically revised some aspects of them (Phillips 2007).

²⁸ Since the infant cannot differentiate between her mother’s body and her own in the very early months of life, they are also undifferentiated physically, from the infant’s perspective.

reliably responsive to the child, she or he begins to have confidence in the durability of the ‘outer’ reality.

Winnicott wrote that from infancy, and all through life, “no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality”. He theorized that relief from this strain is provided by “an intermediate area of *experience*, to which inner reality and external life both contribute” (Winnicott 1971, p.2, italics in original), which he called a ‘transitional space’. Writing about this ‘transitional space’, Hollway (2011a, p.50) notes that “(r)eality and imagination are often treated as binary terms, with connotations of external and internal worlds, characterised by objectivity and subjectivity respectively”. For Winnicott (1971, p.103),

(t)he potential space between baby and mother, between child and family, between individual and society or the world, depends on experience which leads to trust. It can be looked upon as sacred to the individual in that it is here that the individual experiences creative living.

Winnicott’s transitional space provides a kind of bridge between imagination and reality, and is a useful way of thinking about how women might perceive their fantasies of maternity and a child—their “sense of myself as a mother”— as a *different* kind of reality that is difficult to articulate.

Winnicott considered that for children, play— which he understood as childrens’ way of “finding and becoming a self” (Phillips 2007, p.119)—happens ‘in’ this transitional space, but he understood it as a space that continues to play a part in adults’ lives too, because it is here that ‘cultural experience’ takes place.²⁹ He also saw the analytic setting to be a transitional space for collaborative exchange (Phillips 2007, p.118). He appears to have conceptualized this intermediate space as a psychic space that forms an ongoing part of our lives as humans; he located it as the space in which we ‘are’ “when we are doing what in fact we do a great deal of our time, namely, enjoying ourselves” (Winnicott 1971, p.106). For the purposes of this thesis then, the ‘transitional space’ provides a way of conceptualizing ‘*where*’ women’s ongoing fantasies might happen psychically.

2.5 The bases of maternal fantasies

I turn now to consider *how*, psychosocially, these fantasies might be understood to develop. I look first at work that theorizes the psychic aspects of how a woman who *has* had a baby develops her “sense of herself as a mother” before discussing what the implications might be for those who expected to have a child, but have not done so. I extend this further through an

²⁹ Winnicott wrote of ‘culture’ as “something that is in the common pool of humanity” (Winnicott 1971, p.99).

engagement with Ettinger's concept of the trans-subjective matrixial borderspace. Finally, I pay attention to the social context through a focus on theories of individualization.

Intersubjectivity, and archaic re-membering

While psychoanalytic theory had typically focused on the psychological development of the baby through an ongoing processes of individuation, in his work Winnicott developed a relational emphasis on the dynamic interplay between mothers and their children, and the *mutual* identity development that occurred through this. As I have suggested, he theorized that the infant first begins to develop and organize its sense of self within the psyche-soma of its mother intersubjectively (Winnicott 1958).³⁰

Drawing from this in her psychosocial study of identity development in new mothers Hollway (2006, p.65) argues that a new mother identifies both with her baby *and* her mother through the "vestigial experience" (Hollway 2006, p.65) of her own infantile and child state in relationship with her mother, even though as an adult she has separated to a greater or lesser extent and developed differentiation from her as she grew.³¹ She writes that becoming a mother positions women as a "generational pivot" because they are able to draw on 'memories' of this process in their own infancy and in this identification, "both with their mothers (as babies) and their babies (as mothers)" (Hollway 2009a, p.4). Of this process Stern (1999, p.181) writes:

(T)he mother's stored memories or memorial fragments (...) include both sides of her interaction (...) with her own mother when she was young: the parts that she experienced directly as a baby, while interacting with her mother, and the part of her mother's experience of interacting with her that she experienced empathically (via imitation and primary identification).

Raphael-Leff (2009, p.2) provides a clue to some of the possible mechanisms of this process when she writes that as a mother of a new baby a woman is pulled back in memory and fantasy because of her prolonged exposure to her baby's "raw feelings" and her

unremitting contact with the smell and feel of primal substances (amniotic fluid, lochia, colostrum, urine, faeces, breast milk, mucus, posset etc) implicitly absorbed from the mother's own archaic carer's childbearing body.

³⁰ The concept of unconscious intersubjectivity is premised on the sense that the individual subject is "constituted relationally, right through to the deepest most hidden part of their subjectivity" (Diamond & Marrone 2003, p.17). Hollway (2006, p.50) describes it as the "unconscious flowing of mental states between one person and another that constantly modifies them".

³¹ The concept of identification is understood differently in various strands of psychoanalytic thought. I use it here in the sense of the formation of identity (Hird 2003); "a mechanism through which what is outside comes to be registered within" (Frosh 2002, p.62), where there is "no firm division between inside and out, but rather a fluid interchange in which each penetrates the other" (Frosh 2002, p.56). From Benjamin (1998), who distinguishes between identification and incorporation, I take the idea that this process is intersubjective in the sense that aspects of the other are accepted and used by an individual without destroying the other in doing so.

I use the word ‘memory’ in a particular sense here. Stone (2012, p.6) distinguishes between “explicit” remembering which is “mediated by language and the categories it encodes, and by the publicly shared map of time and space”, and the “bodily, habitual, emotional remembering” that is archaic and preverbal; what Klein (1959/1975, p.180) called “having memories in feelings”. The latter are not experienced as memories but rather “consist of schemata for behaviour or for certain patterns of emotional reaction to given kinds of situation”, and are re-membered and reproduced in the corporeality of relationships with others; through the “raw and visceral” experience of a mother’s constant bodily closeness to her baby as Raphael-Leff has suggested, for example (Stone 2012, p.5). Stone writes that in this re-membering as a mother in relation to her baby, a woman is “drawn back to re-inhabit her earlier position *as* one who reciprocates, mimics, and reproduces her own mother’s behaviour” (2012, p. 11, italics in original). In this way, she writes, she reproduces her own mother’s ‘idiom of care’ (Bollas 1987, p.32).

In this light, I propose the possibility that women who have not yet had children are also positioned as a generational pivot in the way Hollway discusses, although perhaps not as vividly, since they are not immersed in the living viscosity in the same way. Nevertheless, it may be that, in the ‘transitional space’ between imagination and reality, they too have the capacity to identify with their mothers in fantasizing their own potential motherhood, and with their infantile state in fantasizing their potential child(ren). This is perhaps part of what Chodorow (2003) was referring to in the epigraph to this chapter, when she placed the beginnings of motherhood “internally in the conflictual, intense cauldron of childhood sexuality and object relations”. In the subsequent analytic chapters of the thesis I will present research materials to support this proposal.

Stone argues that in the usual course of their adult lives today—as opposed to a former time or in other places where people might have more ongoing contact with babies as part of their everyday lives in families and communities—the relational and corporeal aspect of these early ‘memories’ are usually dormant because our adult contexts seldom evoke it. Based on my research materials, I will suggest that, while the intensity of these ‘memories’ evoked by the embodied relationship that a mother has to her newborn baby may not have been experienced by a woman who has not yet had a child or cared intensively for one, *other* experiences in her life may quicken the archaic memories of her early time with her own mother. In my data, this was indicated in several instances where women had terminated a pregnancy. For example, Maree’s comment that becoming pregnant “did something to me. Um, it was quite, it, it, it kind of, that maternal thing that wasn’t there before came”, which I discuss further in Chapter

4, illustrated this. Although Maree found it hard to articulate *what* changed for her when she had become pregnant, she was unequivocal that something had happened. For other women who had not become pregnant, the ‘re-membling’ was not always as explicit, but was rather voiced as Deborah did, in some version of “a sense of myself as a mother”.

Trans-subjectivity and the matrixial borderspace

The theoretical basis for my proposal is taken a step further with the notion of trans-subjectivity and Ettinger’s (2006a, 2006b) concept of the ‘matrixial borderspace’; a conceptual ‘space’ which Ettinger (Lichtenberg-Ettinger 1997, p. 392) sees as a “prototype” of Winnicott’s concept of the ‘transitional space’.

Building on Klein’s theorization of the series of relationships between the baby and the maternal body as part-objects, Winnicott and other post-Kleinian object relations theorists had pushed the origins and development of subjectivity back to the archaic field of intersubjective relations and events between infants and their carers (usually understood to be the mother) in the early months of a baby’s life. These accounts generally begin with the rupture of the baby’s separation from its mother at the trauma of birth (Pollock 2009, p.16), followed by further individualization via weaning, motor development, language acquisition and so forth. This is the binary ‘phallic mode’ that underpins dominant psychoanalytic (and popular) assumptions of human subjectivity and relationships. Here the mother is considered primarily through her impact on the development and experience of the child, rather than acknowledging that mothers have their own lived experience of their relationships with their children, and their own process of development as mothers, which is not necessarily in step with their children’s (Stone 2011). In these accounts the maternal body is primarily interpreted as a background or container that an individual is required to leave in order to become a self (Stone 2012).

In her concept of the ‘matrixial borderspace’ Bracha Ettinger extends this existing psychoanalytic paradigm back further still, to a prenatal, prematernal “trans-subjectivity” (Pollock 2006, p.14) between a mother and her child; that is, to gestation and the psychic and bodily experience of pregnancy (Boyne, 2004). Here subjectivity is conceived of as a stratum of primordial *encounter* between subjectivities-to-be that are unknown to one another, and yet ‘recognize’ each other and develop in relation to one another.³² Ettinger (1996, p.125) refers to this “psychic creative borderspace of encounter” as the ‘matrix’, and she looks to this

³² Hollway (2012a, p.550) writes that the metaphor of a stratum that Ettinger engages “provides the insight that the trans-subjective is overlaid but also that it remains the bedrock of subjectivity. It is the original stratum, speaking ontogenetically”.

encounter of pregnancy as the “basic pattern” for an alternative mode of relationship which precedes and runs *alongside* (rather than instead of) the phallic mode in individuals’ day-to-day lives; a prototype for other human situations and processes in which the non-I is not an intruder but a partner in difference, a dimension of subjectivity that is from its emergence “several, joint-in-separateness, distant-in-proximity” (Pollock 2006, p.28).

Ettinger’s proposal that aspects of the uterine experience continue to weave together with those that come about through a subject’s experience *after* birth is grounded in feminist critiques of the notion that separation from the mother is necessary in order for a subject to become an independent and autonomous subject. The understanding of an ongoing porosity between individuals on which this trans-subjective ‘memory’ might be based is in marked contrast to the binaries implicit in the phallic mode, and has radical implications for considerations of human subjectivity. Her trans-subjective concepts of matrixial border linking and border spacing moves beyond notions of ‘identification’ and ‘disidentification’ to one of a shared matrixial space in which the subject-becoming-a-mother and the subject-becoming-a-child modify one another. Hollway (2012a, p.551) writes:

Such processes continue throughout life, albeit overlaid by other, more individualized strata. In this view, separation no longer appears as a process of formation of autonomous individual subjects, but more like an ongoing choreography whose flow is not reducible to such units. In this sense, separation can be understood as always accompanied by trans-subjectivity, however buried, however conflicted.

Pollock has written extensively about Ettinger’s work, and while commenting that it “invites us to recognise, to re-cognise, a subjectivising partnership that is primordially *feminine*”(2009, p.11) she anticipates feminist criticism of the idea of the ‘feminine’ being mobilized in this way. She writes that the matrix is “about a model for human situations and processes, psychically, imaginatively and symbolically built upon a primordial, ethical/aesthetical situation of human becoming” (2009, p.5). It is not, she says, “about cosy mothers and babies, symbiosis and fusion, nor fantasies to return to oceanic self-loss” (2009, p.5). Neither is it about the physical organs of the penis or the womb. Just as the penis is understood to support the conceptualization of the phallic/Oedipal field, but the phallus is not identified with the penis, so the womb, pregnancy and gestation supports the theorization of the matrixial field (Ettinger 2004, p.78). The matrix is not identified with the organ of the womb, but rather “a complex apparatus modeled on this site of feminine/prenatal encounter—not fusion—that places any human becoming-subject-to-be, male or female, in relation with female bodily specificity” (Ettinger 2006a, p.141).

Since the matrixial stratum is originary, and is not extinguished after birth, the dimensions of subjectivity within the matrixial stratum are available to all after birth and throughout life; to both men and women, to mothers and non-mothers, and to fathers. Female subjects however, are understood to have “double access” to the matrixial because they experience the womb both as an archaic site in their past—as males also do—and also as a potential “future site” (Ettinger 2006a, p.143). Pollock writes:

Those of us born into, and housing our subjectivities in bodies which have the potential to generate, to repeat the process of our own becoming in the matrixial severality that marks human sexual procreation, are already border linked to the sexual-feminine, maternal at the level of unremembered memory and imaginative projection that may be fore-closed under phallocentrism (Pollock 2009, p.15).

The concept of the matrixial borderspace takes account of another dimension of human experience in a way that has particular salience for this topic. In addition to the intersubjective ‘memory’ of the relationship between a mother and her infant that contact with mothers and babies in their day-to-day lives may trigger—as discussed in the previous section—the concept of the matrixial has the potential to provide insight into a further mechanism by which circumstantially childless women might have access to a “sense of myself as a mother” and the fantasies of maternity and a child that it entails.

Problems with use of the matrixial

There are, however, immense difficulties in identifying and engaging with this dimension in empirical terms in a social science research project such as this. These processes are difficult to articulate because the language and discourses available to describe them are structured within phallic principles. Ettinger (2009, p.371) argues that “(d)iscourse, conducted by speech, repressed in the Other, carries principles of language and society that dwell in the Symbolic; the symbolic Other restructures/constructs archaic processes, modes, and materials as no longer accessible”. The effect of this inaccessibility is that the language to *express* and to *think about* a potential pre-birth/pre-language dimension of this experience is also unavailable. This may be one of the reasons that many participants struggled to articulate their “sense of myself as a mother” and resorted to language and metaphors associated with the body in talking about their experience.

Further to the lack of an available language, the prenatal/ feminine encounters are “affect-laden time-space-body experiences” (Ettinger 2009, p.379) that “induce archaic-past but also elusive present-psychic traces” in individuals. The field of the study of affect as registers of experience is developing across a range of disciplines. ‘Affect’ in that field refers to

“processes of life and vitality which circulate and pass between bodies” that “cannot easily be seen, and which might variously be described as non-cognitive, trans-subjective, non-conscious, non-representational, incorporeal and immaterial” (Blackman 2012, p.4).

Blackman notes that these processes too are “difficult to capture or study in any conventional methodological sense”. Ettinger (2009, p.393) writes:

(t)races of the encounters are transmitted between the *I* and the *non-I* in what is experienced by a whole range of matrixial border feelings like uncanniness, compassion, empathy,[...] which, because of the foreclosure of the *matrix* from the symbolic network, we mainly have a poetic vocabulary to describe, and we tend to think of as mysterious, reasonless and mystical sensations.

Hollway (2012a, p.21) found participants’ repeated use of the word “weird” in their attempts to describe their experience of new motherhood to be an indicator of a matrixial dimension that exceeded the language available to them. In the research materials generated in this project I glimpse what might be interpreted to be aspects of the matrixial dimension occurring most often in the moments when the narrative falters; in the spaces where words are unavailable, or the words used are a space filler for something the narrator experiences, but seems unable to articulate. Such spaces are potent and full of meaning, and are themselves available for analysis. Work such as this, however, is inevitably open to critique that the interpretation of the ‘space’ (or space-filler word/term) is unverifiable in conventional terms.

A matrixial perspective adds a further dimension to my discussion of intersubjective ‘memory’ triggered by contact with the demands of a newborn baby, by suggesting that the origins of a woman’s maternal fantasies might be traced to a time and condition prior to birth *as well as* after it. The significance of the matrixial for this thesis is in its capacity to theorize a further dimension of subjectivity and experience that circumstantially childless women may unconsciously draw on in the development of their maternal thoughts and fantasies.³³ It may be that it relates to an inexpressible ‘knowing’ that later “becomes the affective underside of certain aspects and dimensions of our relational modes with the world, our others, living or dead, alive and not-yet-alive, human and non-human, past and present” (Pollock, 2009, p.8). For these reasons, it adds an important dimension for my inquiry that warrants my using it, though I acknowledge my treatment of it is necessarily brief and partial.

If my matrixial reading of the data in the analytical chapters that follow is somewhat tentative, it is because I am aware of the potential for such an analysis to be overstated, its claims outreaching the scope of the material. The use of matrixial theory empirically rests on the

³³ This is different from work that explores the social, biological and technological complexities of what constitutes a ‘mother’ (eg Letherby 1994) In this work I am extending beyond the *practices* of mothering to different dimension of a maternal subjectivity and a baby/child that exists ‘only’ in fantasy.

researcher's/reader's openness to and awareness of the possibility of a matrixial dimension in their own lives, and to see its traces in the lives of others. It is a willingness to shift to another dimension of 'knowing' that makes a matrixial reading of the meaning of "mysterious, reasonless and mystical" experiences expressed in these research materials possible.

The Individualization Thesis

Along with their experiences in relation to their mothers and other carers throughout their lives, women's fantasies of maternity and a child are created out of their conscious and unconscious interactions with the social and cultural worlds in which they are immersed as they grow up. Young women's lives are saturated from birth to adulthood with media and experiences that present them with a limitless range of understandings of who 'should' or 'should not' become a mother, when and under what circumstances they might do so, how they might go about mothering, and what it is to be a mother. Writing about the experience of new mothers in the U.K. Thomson *et al* (2011, p.2) note:

(W)hat it means to be a mother is shape-shifting in line with women's increased participation in work and education. The general trend is towards later motherhood, delaying the birth of a first child until education is completed and the career is well established. Emotional stability, financial security and the 'right' relationship are expected to fall in line with this life trajectory, making birth the apex of achievement for grown-up girls living the success-story narrative of contemporary times.

Contemporary social theory articulates the "success-story narrative" in Western societies as one of 'individualization', where traditional ties to social structures such as family and church have been loosened, and individuals are required to develop their own 'reflexive project of the self' (Giddens 1991); to be "artists" of their own lives who produce structured lives through a process of rational choice-making (Bauman 2008). Beck-Gernsheim (2002) suggests that, for young women, this post-traditional order is in part an outcome of greater educational opportunities for women and changes in educational systems that have created a growing pressure to perform, compete and succeed. Similarly, she argues that changes in the workplace and in women's relationship to paid work have resulted in increased geographical and social mobility, and to new occupational possibilities for women. These huge social shifts have resulted in young women's life plans, circumstances, and expectations being very different from their mothers' at a similar age. As a consequence, they need to develop solutions and ways of behaving that are not guided or structured by the choices their mothers made.

For most young women, the “‘right’ relationship” is, as Thomson *et al.* imply, still an essential part of the “success-story narrative”. As I noted in Chapter 1, finding the ‘right’ relationship was generally understood to be a necessary prerequisite to having a child for most of the participants in this project. Beck-Gernsheim suggests this is part of the “push-pull” of individualization (Smart 2007) whereby individuals are drawn to love and stable relationships at the same time as processes of social transformation—such as improved contraception, a greater acceptance and rate of divorce, and changed sexual norms—have resulted in women claiming greater autonomy in all aspects of their lives. She argues that, as a result, individualization in the context of romantic relationships means “the newly emerging form of the couple always has behind it *a claim of one’s own on life*” (2002, p.72, italics in original). Women, she suggests, “must increasingly come forward as individuals with their own interests and rights, plans and choices” (2002, p.90). Economically, for example, they understand themselves as being required to plan ahead for their own financial security, rather than presuming that their husband will take care of them within the protection of their marriage. A sense of this personal responsibility for themselves and their life trajectory was evident in the narratives of many of the participants in this research, and was often discussed in terms of competing choices to be made. In talking about the conflict between her desire to have a child and her perceived need to make plans and provisions for her future Maree, for example, said, “I need to plan for my own future security, and I want to own my home and land, so [pause] just feeling really torn”.

Amongst the key theorists whose work has come to exemplify the individualization approach, Beck-Gernsheim’s (2002) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s (1995) work stands out as most salient to this project because they have paid particular attention to theorizing the ways individuals, couples and families function under conditions of individualization. They posit contemporary families—or, as Beck-Gernsheim has it, the “post-familial family”—as an “elective relationship” (2002, p.97) between individual persons who necessarily go about the “staging of everyday life” (2002, p.90), attempting to hold together personal biographies that constantly tend to pull apart. They describe families of people with scattered lives and working conditions that produce “irregular and fluctuating tempos that do not correspond to such requirements of living together as continuity, stability and co-ordination” (2002, p.91). Throughout their work, they seem very pessimistic about the potential for ‘the family’ to withstand the individualizing pressures of contemporary social conditions (Smart 2007). In this context of inevitably disintegrating families and romantic relationships, they argue that women’s desire to have a child is for something that provides “an anchor”. A child, they

suggest, is “what remains” when traditional bonds and a confidence in the possibility of an enduring love between couples has eroded:

(A child) promises a tie which is more elemental, profound and durable than any other in this society. The more other relationships become interchangeable and revocable, the more a child can become the focus of new hopes—it is the ultimate guarantee of permanence.

(Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1995, pp.72-3)

Entering into a bond with a child is highly attractive, they write, because this relationship is “of a quite different kind than that to another adult”; it is “all-encompassing, lasting, unbreachable, in a sense superior to other liaisons in our barter and throw-away culture” (1995, p.76). This claim is one I heard over and over again in the narratives of participants. Describing the mother/child relationship as “as close to unconditional love I think you’re going to get” Elena commented, “I haven’t really had anything close to it with a partner—OK I’ll say I’ve been in love and you know—but it’s different”.

In one sense, these claims seem idealized and unrealistic (Gatrell 2005). They describe an ideal of an unbreakable bond between parents and children which is often not borne out in life experience; although many people remain close to their parents as adults, many others live very different lives to those their parents lived, and become geographically and emotionally distant from them over time. A biological connection may make for a more durable ‘tie’, but does not necessarily result in a relationship of enduring love, or even a strong social connection. In another sense though, perhaps what both theorists and participants are pointing to is a quality of the relationship between a parent and her or his child that is not readily captured in the language of neo-liberalism that is the available lexicon of theorists of individualization.

Smart (2007, p.17) writes that one of the main adverse criticisms of individualization theories is the “lack of congruence” between the ways family life is discussed in the work of these theorists and “the kinds of lives being represented in local and more closely specified studies”. Gross (2005, p.286) argues that “striking changes have occurred in intimacy and family life over the last half-century, but the notion of detraditionalization as currently formulated does not capture them very well”. He distinguishes between “regulative” traditions, which have declined in strength in recent times and “meaning-constitutive traditions”, referring to the “patterns of sense-making” that families pass on through generations, and which embed individuals in a family culture and history. This is an important distinction for me, because while individualization theories might explain the differences between the lives of these young women and their mothers, they struggle to account for the

similarities, recurring patterns, and ways in which a daughter's life—and reproductive choices—are influenced by those of her mother's.

Agency and choice

Social sciences have long been mired in the problem of a dualism between agency and structure, and the voluntarist/determinist bipolarity associated with it (Spears 2005). Related to this is the idea of 'choice', which is understood as a fundamental and inescapable element of daily life within the notion of the reflexively organized biography of the self (Budgeon 2003). For Baumann (2008, p.53),

Human life consists of a perpetual confrontation between 'external conditions' (perceived as 'reality', by definition a matter always resistant to, and all too often defying, the agent's will) and the designs of its 'auctors' (authors/actors): their aim to overcome the active or passive resistance, defiance and/or inertia of matter and to remould reality in accordance with their chosen vision of the 'good life'.

As Baumann's words suggest, while the necessity for choice is understood to be a given, the question for individualization theorists is one of how rational individuals exercise agency—within social constraints—in negotiating their way through a complex diversity of choices about how they will live their lives (Giddens 1991). Understanding 'choice' in this way, the narratives and drawings of participants in this study can be read as examples of the tensions created by a perceived need to live as an autonomous individual who makes choices amongst competing demands about how she constructs her life. It is illustrated with the data associated with Maree's "feeling really torn" between pursuing her career and having a child, for example.³⁴ Analysing the issues of age-related infertility through this lens, Bute *et al.* (2010) argue for an acknowledgement of the impact of broader social factors in the lives of women who are circumstantially childless as a result of age-related infertility. They write that public discourses about age-related infertility have failed to address these organizational and structural forces that shape and constrain women's reproductive decision-making, because this infertility has been largely framed in the media through the personal painful narratives of the choices made by individual women.

This analysis is useful, but it leaves aside another key dimension in the issue of 'choice'. Salecl (2010, p.97) addressed it when she questioned the applicability of the notion of rational 'choice' in the reproductive decision-making women do. She asked,

³⁴ For a developed discussion of Maree's narrative see Chapter 4, pp.104-114

(H)ow much is reproduction a matter of rational choice, and how much does it involve unconscious mechanisms? How much can we be in charge of our desire or our partner's desire, as well as that of our parents and of society at large, when we decide whether or not to have children?³⁵

Hollway and Jefferson (2005, p.147) provide a psychosocial discussion of agency that takes account of both these unconscious fluid dynamics as well as the conscious choices people make by defining the individual as a “divided psychosocial subject of unconscious conflict; a subject located in social realities mediated not only by social discourses but by psychic defences”. Such a subject's agency is not understood as a series of single decision-making moments but rather “a continuous flow of social practices”(2005, p.149). Both her psychic ‘inner world’ and the social structures of her ‘outer world’ constitute her capacity for agency and the forms of agency that are possible and available to her (Frost & Hoggett 2008).

2.6 Fantasies of nurturing

In the previous sections I have discussed ‘*where*’ fantasies of maternity and a child might be understood to stand in the psychic life of these participants, and aspects of ‘*how*’ they might be understood to develop. In this section I pay attention to the theoretical underpinnings of the main *content* of those fantasies. I will discuss and illustrate this content further, through reference to the research materials, in Chapter 4.

The dominant quality that threaded through the maternal fantasies of many of these participants in this project revolved around the idea of ‘nurturing’. This notion carries connotations of providing the circumstances and attention in which someone or something might thrive—through fostering, encouraging, feeding and nourishing—of training, and perhaps above all, of caring and cherishing.

In focusing on this quality of nurturing and linking it with a longing to be a mother I am on difficult ground politically; the same treacherous ground that Van Balen and Inhorn (2002) suggest has made research into aspects of infertility a “taboo subject” for many feminist researchers. The linkage between notions of ‘nurturing’, the ‘maternal’, and female subjectivity is a site of extensive theorizing, contention, and debate around the idea that women are in some way inherently, and essentially, nurturing, and hence ‘natural’ mothers.

³⁵ She might also have asked how much we can be in charge of our bodies. Williams (2013, p.2) writes, “because abortion is framed in terms of choice, and because the pill allows us not to get pregnant, we think in terms of choice and control—if I can stop myself getting pregnant, I can stop stopping myself. If I can choose an abortion, I can choose a baby”. Williams writes in the context of “the taboos and myths surrounding infertility and science's ability to ‘cure’ it”. Her concerns is that the fertility industry “overclaims” its success rates and that the majority of women who have delayed pregnancy in the expectation that they will be able to have a biological child through new reproductive technologies are not in fact successful in doing so. Zoll (2013) addresses similar issues in her memoir *Cracked open: Liberty, fertility, and the pursuit of high-tech babies*.

Stephens (2011, p.11) notes that “many feminists would insist that the primary focus of the second-wave feminist movement has been one long struggle against essentialism, whether this be biological, cultural or ideological”.³⁶ On the other hand, Daphne De Marneffe (2004, p.25) writes that the desire to care for one’s children is often posited as a “correctable condition” rather than a “core issue” that feminism needs to explore.

‘Feminism’ has never taken a singular position on mothering however (DiQuinzio 1999), or on its relationship to nurturing, and some feminists challenge dominant representations of feminism as having repudiated motherhood (Stephens 2011). As a result, there is a tendency for a polarizing binary to have been created, whereby an alternative feminist strategy of celebrating women’s difference is positioned in relation to these representations, which are often considered to be promaternal and essentialized as biologically based. The participants in this research generally appeared to align themselves with the dominant feminist gender discourse of equality that posits both men and women as autonomous human beings, with a right to freedom and a career and life of their choosing. This stance sometimes created a tension for them, as I will discuss in the chapters that follow.

My aim is to conceptualize ‘nurture’ in such a way that does not conflate ‘woman’ and ‘nurture’ is an essentialist way. I attempt to do this theoretically by tracing the roots of nurturing through Winnicott and Hollway to the intersubjective experience of a baby and child after birth, and through Ettinger to the trans-subjective experience before it. In the section that follows I argue that the capacity to be ‘maternal’, and in particular to express this maternity through the nurture and care of others, is potentially available to both men and women, and to mothers and non-mothers.

The capacity for concern and to care

From an object relations perspective I relate the notion of nurturing most closely within the work of Winnicott to what he theorized as “the capacity for concern”.³⁷ For him, “the fact that the individual *cares*, or *minds*, and both feels and accepts responsibility” (1963/1965, p.73, italics in original) was the essence of this capacity. He understood it to be part of the healthy emotional development of the child in relationship with its mother (and/or father) in very

³⁶ Stephens (2011, p.10) uses the term essentialism in the sense of “the view that any generalized conceptions of the maternal risk ignoring the great diversity in the lives of individual women who may or may not be mothers”; a view based in a false universal that women have a “special or incontrovertible relationship to care and nurture”.

³⁷ Phillips (2007, p.58) notes that Winnicott tends to write of capacities rather than positions or stages, and this emphasis allows for individual differences: “‘Capacity’ with its implication of stored possibility, and its combination of the receptive and the generative, blurs the boundary between activity and passivity”.

early infancy, where a baby moves from a position of “ruthlessly” and narcissistically exploiting his mother (or other caregiver), to a capacity to feel concern for her or him. Winnicott conceptualized the development of this capacity as being contingent on a “good enough” emotional environment having been sustained over a period of time. Developing Winnicott’s theorizing, Hollway (2006) wrote about the origins of nurturing as the ‘capacity to care’. This capacity, she argued (2006, p.50), is made possible by the principle of unconscious intersubjectivity that is central to an object relations approach; that is “the idea that the carer can unconsciously receive emotional communications from a person in need and respond in the service of that other person”.

From this perspective then, the capacity to care and nurture others evolves as part of the development of the self for children and adults of both sexes in relation to maternal care. It is an outcome of being cared *for*, and as such is a product of both internal psychological processes and the relational settings that are mediated by the social structures, resources, social and historical settings, practices of child care and so forth, in which they are embedded. Both Winnicott and Hollway agree that although being ‘mothered’ in this way finds a particular expression in the care of her child by a biological mother, this maternal subjectivity is available to men and women, biological mothers and others. Hollway wrote that maternal subjectivity is “a set of capabilities precipitated by others’ dependence and need for care and modifying both subjectivities through a third space, it does not reside solely in natural mothers or in those who parent children” (Hollway 2006, p.82).³⁸

Hollway makes two qualifications to her argument that maternal subjectivity is available to all. Firstly, she writes (2006, pp.80-81) that “there are specific conditions, biological and historical, structural and psychological, that render actual mothers the most susceptible to the intersubjective dynamics within which maternal subjectivity is constituted”. The psychosocial account I make of the development of a fantasy of maternity being the product of a girl/woman’s ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ worlds, including their identifications with their mothers and other adult women around them is related to this. Secondly, she suggests, “it seems likely that there is a systematic difference in the extent of ruthlessness to which young children subject their real mothers, other women and fathers as primary carers” because “in the child’s phantasy, forged out of the earliest combined psyche-soma, any other person—a third term—represents difference from that original”.

³⁸ Hollway draws here on Ogden’s model of the ‘third’ space which is “a creation of the first two who are also created by it” (Ogden 1994/1999, p. 462, cited in Hollway 2006, p.125). She clarifies that this is different from the psychoanalytic notion of the third term, understood to be that which breaks the mother/child dyad.

The idea that maternal care might also be undertaken by people other than a birth mother was also proposed by Ruddick (1989, p.17) who argued that maternal care requires mothers to provide “works of preservative love, nurturance and training” to children. Ruddick distinguished between birthgiving and mothering, taking the position that mothering is a practice or work, rather than the outcome of “fixed biological or legal relationship to children” (1995, p.xi), and as such “anyone who commits her or himself to responding to children’s demands and makes the work of response a considerable part of her or his life, is a mother” (1995 p.xii). Conceptualising ‘maternal’ subjectivity in this way is different from ‘fathering’ or the notion of ‘parenting’ (see Hollway 2006, ch.5). Baraitser (2009) importantly distinguishes between the idea of maternal work as a set of specific social practices (which Ruddick’s writing addresses), maternal ethics, and maternal subjectivity or identity, suggesting that a more complex picture of the maternal than a set of practices is necessary.

Ribbens McCarthy and Edwards (2002, p.210) contest the concept of mothering as ‘work’ from a different perspective. They suggest that ‘work’ is a gendered and historically situated concept, and that conceptualizing mothering in this way risks “imposing a publically based male vision” on women’s lives with their children in private settings. They write, “(w)hat room is left for mothering as centred on emotion, moral identity and a particularist relationship that does not constitute a purposive project with clearly identifiable outcomes?” They give the example of the notion of “being there” for children as one that is not readily encompassed within the concept of ‘work’ and that depends on a “sense of interconnectedness in the world”.

This critique of the notion of maternal work in this way does not change my key point here however, which is that both men and women, biological mothers and others can ‘do mothering’, or embody a ‘maternal subjectivity’ when it is understood in this way. That is, I want to emphasise that in arguing for the potential development of a capacity to care through the experience of caring for an infant I am not correlating nurturing with femininity or with maternity. Although the identity of ‘mother’ is closely identified with nurturing (Letherby 2012), just as some people who are nurturing are not mothers, some mothers are not nurturing. Hollway also emphasizes this; she wrote (2006, p.80) that “the development of the capacities to care that I am collecting under the term ‘maternal subjectivity’ is not guaranteed by becoming a mother, but the infant does communicate a demand for them and good-enough conditions (external and internal) make their development likely in those who are positioned to receive them”.

Just as ‘maternal subjectivity’ might be understood to be available to women who are not biological mothers, and to men, it is also available in other relationships beyond the mother/baby dyad. Hollway (2006) understands the capacity to care to be in constant dynamic tension with the individual’s need for self differentiation. In maternal subjectivity, and its potential for a mother (or other caregiver) to transcend the often conflictual coexistence of the demands of intersubjectivity and individuality, she sees a “prototype” for other caring relationships. Responding to the ruthless ongoing demands of a baby, she writes, “alters mothers’ subjectivities” (Hollway 2006, p.67) in a way that can also “permeate” other relationships. In Chapter 4 (p.100) I discuss the ways an unconscious awareness of this potential change might be interpreted to underlie the comments Julia made of being “required to love in a particular way” or, as Gina put it, “to have that experience of really existing for another being”. In Chapter 6 I draw on the research materials to illustrate the ways that the participants in this research project understood themselves to be embodying aspects of a ‘maternal’ subjectivity in other nurturing relationships in their lives.

Kristeva (2005, p.2) also theorizes motherhood as a “learning process in how to relate to the other”. She argues that motherhood is “not an instinct” and “cannot be reduced to the desire to have a child”. In terms that are very close to Hollway’s she describes what she terms ‘maternal passion’ as a “prototype of the love relation”.³⁹ For her, this relation entails “narcissistic withdrawal, then a bond with the object through projective identification sublimated as tenderness”. Speaking of ‘maternal passion’ in a structural rather than biological sense she said,

(i)t is not impossible that through psychoanalysis, self-analysis or sublimating work a woman can also live out her maternal passion without gestation and giving birth (through adoption, surrogate mothers and other fertility techniques to come, or on another level through care-taking, teaching, long-term relationships or in communal/community work).

(Kristeva 2005, p.3)

Ettinger’s matrixial theory adds a further dimension to my consideration of the fantasies of nurturing that are such a feature of many of these circumstantially childless women’s versions of “a sense of myself as a mother”. Matrixial theory is complex and I am reluctant to appear to sentimentalize aspects of it. Nevertheless, there is a strong sense of what Ettinger (2006b,

³⁹ The idea that motherhood is a “learning process in how to relate to the other” (Kristeva 2005) is not unchallenged in feminist thought. For example, in a conversation with Lisa Baraitser in the first issue of *Studies in the Maternal* Lynne Segal commented “I’m not sure that mothers really do have this ethical capacity that they’re developing and learning from their relations with their child [...]. I can also see the mother giving up herself in order to allow the child certain things, you know, as a narcissistic gratification as well. This child is also a part of her and will take her forward into eternity and so on. It’s not just a question of abjection and altruism and death of the self, it’s also that you will live through this great little creature that you’re allowing to be free, marching forward into the future” (Segal 2009, p.12).

p.218) calls “com-passionate hospitality” in this theory that resonates with my themes.

Pollock (2009, p.17) writes about the ways in which matrixial fantasies of the mother’s body,

perhaps offer access to other sensations that will later line psychic processes with (...) the co-emergence of affects associated with partial and shifting sense of connection/connectivity, for which we later, retrospectively *yearn*. Even if such yearnings for partial connectivity with an other cause pain, they also may solace something profound in us that undoes the absolute binary of pleasure/pain and forms the basis of our being able to share the suffering of another, or feel with another’s trauma.

I link Ettinger’s theorizing about the roots of this ability to be “sharing the suffering of another”, with Hollway’s ‘capacity to care’ and Winnicott’s ‘capacity for concern’. Ettinger (2009, p.391) suggests that this “connection/connectivity”, which is integral to the matrixial borderspace, is available to both men and women (because all have experienced it as a foetus in their mother’s womb) but is particularly accessible to women because,

the woman *doubly* experiences the matrixial borderspace; first, in the last period of prenatal life (here *she* could be of either sex), and second, as someone who has a womb, at various levels of development and awareness, whether she is a mother or not.

Roseneil (2009, p.412) describes the traces that relationships leave in our lives as “residues” that shape the way our lives develop; she writes that we are “inhabited by our histories of past relationships, and (...) past experiences, our own and those of others, structure our inner experience and relational possibilities in the present”. To think about how women might develop a “sense” of themselves as a mother and of their fantasy child or children I have suggested that the “residues” from their very early relationships with their mothers—before and after birth—and others in their broader social worlds, and their multitudinous and varied experiences of what it is to be a mother as they grew up all ‘inhabit’ them through fantasy, shaping their present lives as adults and indeed their future lives as they grow older. I have conceptualized fantasy as having a weight and consequences for events and relationships in the ‘real’ world. As Frosh writes, “fantasy is not ‘just’ something that occupies an internal space as a kind of mediation of reality, but (...) it also has material effects, directing the activities of people and investing the social world with meaning” (2003, p.1554).

2.7 Theorizing ‘loss’ and ‘grief’⁴⁰

Throughout this thesis I draw on historical and contemporary psychological and psychoanalytic literatures about loss and grieving to construct a theorization of loss and grieving that takes account of the ways in which fantasy invests the social world with meaning, and that can accommodate the particular condition of circumstantial childlessness. I posit loss here as an inevitable part of being human that is inherently neither ‘good’ nor ‘bad’ but exists in the meanings individuals attribute to life events. As such, events—or in the case of circumstantial childlessness, the *absence* of the event of biological childbearing—may or may not be experienced as a loss and if they are, may or may not elicit a grieving response. I understand grieving to be a dynamic and active process (Attig 1996) that may simultaneously incorporate both pain and productivity, in tension with one another. It is a psychosocial phenomenon in the sense that it is structured and maintained socially, but it is primarily experienced personally.

In this section, I discuss theorizations of grief that I draw on in the analytic chapters that follow. Although I predominantly take an object relations approach, throughout the thesis I also engage with other theorists whose work is commensurate with this approach.

Freud and “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917)

The predominantly psychological discourses of grief which dominated Western understandings of grieving over the past century originated in Freud’s 1917 paper *Mourning and Melancholia*. In it he described the ‘work’ of mourning in this way:

The testing of reality, having shown that the loved object no longer exists, requires forthwith that all the libido shall be withdrawn from its attachment to this object.(...)The task is now carried through, bit by bit, under great cathetic energy (until) each single one of the memories and hopes which bound the libido to the object is brought up and hypercatheted, and the detachment of the libido from it accomplished.

(1917/1954, p. 243)

For Freud, “mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, and ideal,

⁴⁰ In the broad and multidisciplinary field of loss and grief writers have little consensus about the definitions of key words, and terms such as ‘grieving’ or ‘mourning’, and ‘loss’ or ‘bereavement’ are often used interchangeably. In psychoanalytic literatures the term ‘mourning’ is employed more frequently than ‘grieving’. When a distinction is drawn, ‘mourning’ is sometimes understood to be the process an individual goes through in relation to a loss, and ‘grief’/ ‘grieving’ the response he or she makes to that loss. In practice, this distinction is not clear however, and is very difficult to maintain in a discussion of these issues. In contemporary popular use outside psychoanalytic discourse, ‘grieving’ is more common. Since my participants were much more likely to conceptualize and describe their experience as ‘grief’ and their responses as ‘grieving’ I use those terms, except when I am engaged in a theoretical discussion; of Klein’s theories of mourning, for example.

and so on” (1917/1954 p.243). Freud’s work generated a “world view” (Klass & Silverman, 1996, p.6) for others who followed him. In particular, the concept of ‘grief work’ that this quote refers to has been reworked in a variety of ways by subsequent theorists, and continues to be debated. It includes the understanding that grieving is a process (rather than an event) of coming to terms with a loss, and that this is a difficult and often ambivalent process which takes time and considerable emotional and psychic energy. Central to it is the idea that relief from the pain of bereavement cannot be achieved without the painful effort of severing the bonds of connection; the process Freud termed *hypercathexis*.

Freud’s work around mourning is widely quoted by later scholars and theorists who have usually interpreted (and later in the century, criticized) his words as an injunction to systematically disengage all connections from the dead person. Although psychoanalysts developed the concept of internalization from his work, many saw this as a preliminary to the ‘letting go’ they understood to be part of grief work. In time, the presumption of the necessity of letting go came to be understood in such a way that a reluctance or inability to do so was understood to be symptomatic of a pathological attempt to deny the reality of the death (Klass & Silverman 1996).

Towards the end of the twentieth century the notion of ‘letting go’ and other aspects of grief work came under serious critique (Bonanno 2009; Wortman and Silver 1989; Stroebe 1993). Revisiting their critique in 2001, Wortman and Silver noted that the grief research community was “revising its views on these issues”, however they considered that the “myths” about the necessity for grief work are still prevalent among clinicians and the general public (2001 p.424). It is in the context of this dominant discourse of the necessity to ‘let go’ that women’s response to not realizing their fantasy is enacted.⁴¹ On the face of it, Freud’s theorizing would appear to have little relevance to the loss issues that circumstantially childless women face. However, although I take a predominantly object relations approach theoretically in this thesis, the presumption that ‘grief work’ is necessary, and the dominance of the Freudian theorizing of grieving in theoretical (and popular) understandings of what grieving entails have a particular salience for this study.

⁴¹ ‘Stage’ theories, in which grief theorists posited the idea that grieving was a process of working through a series of stages towards an eventual ‘acceptance’, are linked to this notion of ‘letting go’. The most popularly recognized paradigm was a stage model of grieving that was developed by Kubler Ross (1969) out of her work with dying people. She proposed a series of five stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Her model was later adapted to grieving more generally (although Kubler Ross herself did not support this adaptation) and was—and frequently still is—an influential training and practice tool widely used in Western nations. While this has been criticized (Corr *et al.* 1997) it has relevance to this study because the idea that grief is a linear process that consists of a series of stages ending in acceptance has become naturalized in popular understanding of grief.

An object relations approach to mourning

From an object relations perspective, grieving is a process whereby the individual regains a sense of security by rebuilding her or his inner world that feels threatened by loss. In theorizing mourning through an object relations lens Klein started with Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia* and linked the "testing of reality" in normal mourning with the processes that she proposed takes place in an infant's mind in relation to anxiety, caused by the fear of the loss of the good object of the mother.⁴² For Klein, loss was considered to be especially significant because of its impact upon this internal fantasy 'good object'. She theorized that the early mourning an infant does in relation to this threatened loss is "revived" whenever grief is experienced in later life (Klein 1940/1986, p.147). She understood mourning, at any age, to be a process of reinstating the lost object internally, and also reinstating the first loved objects—the 'good' parents—at the same time. From an object relations perspective, the losses these circumstantially childless women experience can be understood to be reverberating back to that originary loss.

Klein theorized that where a baby initially perceives her or his mother to be a set of differentiated objects which have been 'split' in the paranoid schizoid position into 'good' and 'bad' objects, as physical maturity (in eyesight for example) develops and the baby is exposed to external reality more, the realization begins to grow that the the loved 'good' objects and the hated and persecutory 'bad' objects are part of the same mother, and that her or his ambivalent feelings of love and hate are directed at the same whole object. This marks what she termed the 'depressive position'.⁴³ Although Klein theorized that the paranoid-schizoid position precedes the depressive position, individuals are understood to move between these two positions in response to loss and stresses throughout their lives.

Although Klein's theorization of mourning is discussed in the context of the death of a loved person, as Freud's was, she was more explicit in extending the process she describes to include experiences beyond bereavement. She wrote:

⁴² Hinshelwood (1991, p.142) explains Klein's conceptualization of the 'good' object as, "(A) sense of there being a good, helpful figure inside the personality felt to reside there, and so closely loved as to constitute the basic primary identification around which the whole of an identity is formed. The good internal object provides the continual dialogue of encouragement and self-esteem on which confidence and psychological security are based".

⁴³ This approach moves from Freud's notion of 'stages' in grieving to a concept of 'positions', implying a dynamic and fluid process where a baby (or grieving adult) oscillates between the 'paranoid-schizoid' position and the 'depressive' position, rather than moving in a linear way from one to the other.

(A)ny pain caused by unhappy experiences, whatever their nature, has something in common with mourning. It reactivates the infantile depressive position, and encountering and overcoming adversity of any kind entails mental work similar to mourning.

Klein (1940/1986, p.164)

While Klein was careful to distinguish the “mental work” of unhappy experiences from mourning (for a person who has died), and was not specific about which aspects of such experiences are in common with it, I think it is valid to extend her theorizing about the process people work through in mourning to the losses of circumstantial childlessness. Klein’s discussion of the psychic work entailed in grieving and its relationship to early infant emotional experiences is a possible explanation for the intensity of women’s grief responses. Using these theoretical tools one can understand their grieving for the unique losses of childlessness to be laced with a sense of the precarious nature of their first early experience of grief, the threat of overwhelming emotions and ambivalence, and the fear of chaotic disintegration that it entailed.

Klein also pointed to the part played by the acknowledgement and support of others in the bereaved person’s social world in a way that adumbrated a psychosocial approach. She wrote that at the time the infant is struggling with the feared loss of the internal ‘good’ object of her or his mother, the ongoing embodied presence of the real mother is a great help to her or him. She related this to the experience of a mourning adult:

Similarly, if the mourner has people whom he loves and who share his grief, and if he can accept their sympathy, the restoration of the harmony in his inner world is promoted, and his fears and distress are more quickly reduced.

(Klein 1940/1986 p.165)

Her words have important implications for this research because they point to the additional and ongoing distress and psychic disharmony that ensues when there are not others about with whom a grieving woman can “share” her grief, or if she is unable to accept their “sympathy”. This was the experience of many of the participants, as I will discuss in the chapters that follow.

Although he did not write directly about mourning in the circumstances of bereavement, Winnicott shared Klein’s understanding that the processes that form the basis of later mourning responses stem from the infant’s early experiences. He wrote that “most of the processes that start up in early infancy are never fully established and continue to be strengthened by the growth that continues in later childhood, and indeed in adult life, even old

age” (Winnicott 1965, p.74).⁴⁴ For Winnicott “the capacity to feel sad and to be able to recognise a sense of loss is a developmental achievement” (Abram 2013, p.88). Writing about Klein’s conceptualization of the depressive position he wrote that “(t)he capacity to become depressed, to have a reactive depression, to mourn loss, is something that is not inborn nor is it an illness; it comes as an achievement of healthy emotional growth” (Winnicott 1988, p.86).

Contemporary views of grieving

Conventional theoretical approaches to grief that emerged—primarily out of the Freudian account of mourning—have been criticized for their “psychological reductionism” (Thompson 2002, p.5) because they ignore individual and cultural variations in the response to loss, and individualize the grieving experience as a “private act outside the context of human relatedness” (Neimeyer 1998, p.338). Towards the end of last century a new set of approaches significantly departed from these older understandings. They critiqued the necessity of ‘letting go’ and of an ultimate ‘acceptance’ for grief ‘resolution’ that were presumed to be an essential part of the grieving process. The emerging model was exemplified in the 1996 publications of Silverman, Klass and Nickman’s *Continuing bonds: New understandings of grief* and of Walter’s paper *A new model of grief: Bereavement and biography*. The new paradigm posits the purpose of grief not to be ‘hypercathexis’ but rather one of creating an ongoing “continuing” bond with the person who has died.⁴⁵ Writing about these new approaches Klass noted:

The consensus that seems to be emerging among scholars and clinicians is that the purpose or goal of grief is the construction of a “durable biography” (Walter 1996), a narrative story (Neimeyer and Stewart 1996) that organizes and makes meaning of the survivor’s life after the death as well as of the life of the person who died.

(Klass 2001, p.78)

These approaches have primarily been employed in empirical studies of bereavement, but are useful in this study for their understanding of grieving as an ongoing process of meaning-making over time. One of the central features of these women’s narratives of circumstantial childlessness has been the focus they have on the dynamic quality of loss.

⁴⁴ Winnicott considered Klein’s conceptualization of the depressive position is position to be her most important contribution to psychoanalytic theory, alongside Freud’s concept of the Oedipus concept (Winnicott 1963).

⁴⁵ Though this paradigm represents a radical shift in understanding about grief in the Western world, it has been a very common pattern throughout history in most other parts of the world, and in the Western world in premodern times (Klass & Walter 2001, p.433). In New Zealand, the Maori cultural practice of *whakapapa*, the descent line which traces “the connection between ancestors and their descendants” (Metge 1995, p.336), recognizes the place that the people who have died continue to play in the lives of the living.

Sociological and psychosocial explorations of issues, such as that of the impact of rapid social changes in people's lives, deindustrialization and forced migration (Frost & Hoggett 2008), open up conceptualizations of loss and its associated grief that do acknowledge losses apart from death, and have potential for this study. These approaches often identify the role of loss in subaltern identities, and open up a consideration of losses and grief that is productive for this work. Butler (2004 p.467) suggests that they offer a way to think of loss as "constituting social, political and aesthetic relations, thereby overcoming the conventional understanding that 'loss' belongs to a purely psychological or psychoanalytic discourse".

Eng and Kazanjian (2003 p.ix), for example, articulate loss as "potential presence" in a way that resonates with the metaphor of negative space, and with what I describe in Chapter 4 as the 'absent presence' of the fantasy child. Instead of imputing to loss a "purely negative quality" they conceptualize it as "productive rather than pathological, abundant rather than lacking". They make what they describe as a "double take" on loss: one which both "slackens and lingers" on what is lost, and which also "moves and creates". Their focus is primarily on political and social losses, but in their suggestion of a "continuous engagement with loss and its remains", they open up the possibility for considering grieving in response to loss as a creative process of identity production and meaning-making in the context of the fluidity of life's inevitable changes and transitions, that meshes well with the processes of adaptation that I propose circumstantially childless women make. I draw on this approach to grieving in my discussion of the processes of adaptation women make to not having a child when they expected to do so in Chapter 6.

Meaning-making

A sociological perspective informed Parkes in his development in 1971 of the term "psychosocial transition" to describe the ways in which people are challenged to make changes in their assumptive worlds and develop a new identity in the face of major loss (Parkes 1998, p.22). His theorizing was premised on the idea that people create "structures of meaning" (Marris 1974) as a way of making sense of the world and their place in it, and that major changes in their life represent crises in this construction which need to be resolved. It paved the way for a discourse of grief as a process in which people are engaged in "incorporating and reinterpreting the past", rather than giving it up (Parkes 2001, p.41).

The concept of grieving as a process of meaning making that I draw on in Chapter 6 has its origins in this work. Thompson (2002, p.7) explains it as being premised on the fundamental argument that people who experience a profound loss also experience a loss of meaning; "a

potentially deep-going disruption of our life story”. The process of grieving can be understood as one of making sense of the loss, reconstructing aspects of life directly affected by it and integrating the significance of it after the previous meaning system has been disrupted (Thompson 2002). Neimeyer and Anderson (2002) describe three important aspects to reconstructing meaning after a loss: sense making; benefit finding and identity reconstruction. This provides a useful way of thinking about the ways women adapt to new way of understanding themselves and their lives when they have previously seen themselves becoming biological mothers. It adds insight into the need they may feel to establish a positive self identity when aspects of their being which have contributed to their self identity—such as their “sense of myself as a mother”—are perceived to have been altered or lost.

Viewed through the lens of ‘meaning reconstruction’, the loss of the realization of fantasies of maternity and a child—or the adaptation of them in some way—might be understood as being a transformation of the assumed ‘self’ in the same way that becoming a mother is (Baraitser 2006, De Marneffe 2006a). Butler writes:

Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say *submitting* to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance. There is losing, as we know, but there is also the transformative effect of loss and this latter cannot be charted or planned (Butler 2004, p.21).

2.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I have constructed a web of theories relevant to what has engaged me in the research material, and that supports the analytical work I do in the chapters that follow. My focus on the fantasy of themselves as a mother in relationship with a child, and the ways this is implicated in these participants’ experience of loss and potential grief has shaped the forms of theory with which I have engaged. Having established the ontological bases of the psychosocial approach I have taken in the thesis, I turn now to a discussion of the methods I have used to gather, record and analyze the research materials.

Chapter 3: “(T)hings that slip and slide”

Pain and pleasures, hopes and horrors, intuitions and apprehensions, losses and redemptions, mundanities and visions, angels and demons, things that slip and slide, or appear and disappear, change shape or don't have much form at all, unpredictabilities, these are just a few of the phenomena that are hardly caught by social science methods.

(Law 2004, p.2)

3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapters I introduced my focus on fantasy—of the “sense of myself as a mother” and of a child—in the lives of circumstantially childless women. The data in this project were laced with the traces of both participants’ fantasy children, and of their potential maternal subjectivities. I caught glimpses of these fantasies permeating their lives, but they were not always easy to identify in their talk. Identifying fantasies is a difficult business methodologically, and my task perhaps epitomized the kind of epistemological difficulties Law speaks of in the epigram to this chapter. It entailed traversing what Gordon (1997, p.24) described as “the always unsettled relationship between what we see and what we know”.

Methodologies have been a central part of this project for me because, in shifting from counsellor to researcher, epistemological and ethical issues have come sharply into focus. The gap between “what we see and what we know” is understood differently in these two practices for example, and ways of ‘knowing’ (and of checking out tentative interpretations) that I use as a counsellor were unavailable or contested in the research context (Emerson & Frosh 2005), as I discuss further below. I often felt that I was working backwards in analysis of the data; moving from what I (tentatively) ‘knew’ through my encounters with participants to finding ways of theorizing this knowledge in social science research terms. Although innovative practices have opened up in the spaces created by the radical changes that feminist and post structural methodologies and the ‘cultural turn’ (Roseneil & Frosh 2012) more generally have created in research methodology and methods, within social science ‘method’ “still tends to summon up a relatively limited repertoire of responses” (Law 2004, p.3). Law (2004, p.4) argued that “while standard methods are often extremely good at what they do, they are badly adapted to the study of the ephemeral, the indefinite and the irregular”. He suggested that in order to ‘know’ these things researchers need to develop methods that are “unusual or unknown in social science” (2004, p.3). He proposed, for example: knowing as embodiment; knowing as emotionality or apprehension; knowing as situated inquiry; and

knowing “the indistinct and the slippery without trying to grasp and hold them tight” (2004, p.3).

Some of these ways of knowing are amongst those that are developing—and being debated—in the emerging field of psychoanalytically-informed empirical psychosocial research (Hollway & Jefferson 2013) which I discussed in the previous chapter, and in which I situate this work. In this chapter I begin by discussing the methods I used in collecting the research materials for the study. I go on to outline the epistemological and ethical implications of the psychosocial approach I take. I discuss the effectiveness and limitations of the analytical research strategies I used to ‘know’ the “things that slip and slide”. I pay close attention to these methods in this chapter because although they are conducted within a small-scale project and have scope for much further development and use, I consider them to be useful parts of the contribution this thesis makes to new knowledge. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of aspects of the research materials associated with Lynn that illustrate some of the key points I have made in the chapter.

3.2 Collecting the research materials

In designing my research strategy for this study I decided primarily to use semi-structured in-depth individual interviews. In reviewing empirical research work using an object relations, psychoanalytically-informed, psychosocial methodology I saw this method of eliciting narratives as having the capacity for me to co-construct with participants the kinds of data that would best meet my research aims. I chose to complement individual interviews with group interviews because they have the potential to be more interactive, and to generate a different kind of talk. Another reason for using groups was that I was concerned about the limitations inherent in working on my own without the input of other researchers who would provide triangulation (Hollway & Jefferson 2013) in interpretation and analysis of the data. My use of groups was intended in part to address this concern, although not all participants were willing to be part of a group interview. I discuss both group and individual interviewing in more detail below.

My aim in recruiting participants was to gather a range of visual and written texts that would address the complexities of what is in play for women who identify themselves as circumstantially childless. I considered that I could better meet the aims of the study through working in depth with the interviews and drawings associated with a small number of women rather than a more superficial attention to the data associated with a large number of participants. As a consequence of this I did not go about recruiting a larger sample of

participants with the goal of differentiating between the experience of different social groupings of women. For example, I did not make a particular attempt to find Maori women, although it is possible that they may have added a different cultural dimension to their consideration of the issues associated with circumstantial childlessness.⁴⁶

Recruiting participants

I did not anticipate having difficulty in identifying participants, and this was my experience. Indeed, as people began to hear about the research informally, I had more women offering to take part than I needed. I recruited women in a variety of ways, as I discuss below, but this was only partially successful in creating diversity among the participants in terms of their education. Though they came from a broad range of backgrounds, most are educated to tertiary level and I think this created a different set of options than they might have had available to them if they had less education and subsequently fewer work opportunities. Nine of the women are not New Zealanders by birth, and three of these do not have English as their first language, although they are entirely fluent in it.

In order to find participants from different areas of New Zealand respondents were recruited via their responses to information about the research promulgated in a variety of ways around the country: posters in a large government department's head office; notices in the national newsletters of a fertility consumers' support group and of the local branch of a national organization of counsellors; a university women's group email list; and personal links between some of the women I interviewed.⁴⁷

The study received approval from the Human Ethics Committee of the University of Canterbury.⁴⁸ As part of the application process I stipulated that I would not interview women with whom I had previously worked as a counsellor because it was important that my different roles as a counsellor and a researcher were not confused in the relationships I had with participants. I initially met with three women whom I did not know well, but knew to be circumstantially childless, and who approached me through the university when they heard about my study. They in turn linked me with other women. This experience of 'snowballing'

⁴⁶ This comment is based on my experience in writing a book about women's experience of stillbirth (Tonkin, 1998), in which the Maori women I spoke to took a very different approach both to the experience of childbirth and to participating in a research project about it. The women I spoke to then identified very strongly with their traditional Maori cultural heritage, in which a child is considered to belong to the whole family, rather than to the biological parents, as usually understood in *pakeha* (New Zealanders of European origins) families. In the current project I did not ask whether or not any participants identified as Maori. Some may have done so, but they were not explicit about this in their interviews. A summary of participants is in Appendix 1 on p.205.

⁴⁷ Details of the information sheet are in Appendix 4 on p. 209, and of the poster in Appendix 2 on p.206

⁴⁸ See Appendix 9 on p.215.

was not a simple one of women passing on a name; a number of participants commented to me that they had friends who were only willing to see me because I knew me to be also a grief counsellor and they had an expectation that I would as a consequence be “gentle” with difficult feelings. Some participants told me that they knew of other women who were unwilling to talk to me because they anticipated it would be too painful to do so. In this way, the very process of recruiting participants gave me information about issues of grief and silencing which were further elaborated in the interviews.

In all I interviewed 29 women individually, but five did not become part of the final interview set of 24 women: one I used as a pilot case before finalizing my interview questions; and one participant did not return her transcript. Three further women were in their mid to late 50s, and while their interviews gave me a sense of how women who are past the point of active decision-making about reproduction might talk about it in reflection, I decided to limit this study to the experience of women for whom it is more of a present concern. The research thus comprises individual interviews with 24 women whose ages range from 33 to 50 and whom I interviewed over a period of 15 months; 14 women in Christchurch, four in Dunedin, three in Wellington, and three in Auckland. I interviewed most of the women in their own homes, but in a few cases this was not feasible, and we met in a private space that was mutually arranged. My analysis initially drew on the data associated with all of these participants, but in the later stages of analysis I narrowed my focus to a more detailed exploration of ten cases, as I discuss further below.

Interviewing and transcription

I see interviewing as a process of active engagement that is different from day-to-day conversation in that it is a conscious, meaning-making process in which both parties are “necessarily and unavoidably active” (Gubrium & Holstein 2003, p.68). These interviews were “guided conversations” (Cole & Knowles 2001) that also had some of the informality and reciprocal quality of everyday conversation about them. I understand the narrative that emerged to be jointly constructed in the post-structural sense that each conversation is necessarily a product of the unique interaction of the participants in it rather than being a “neutral account of a pre-existing reality” (Hollway & Jefferson 2013, p.29).

I interviewed each participant individually for around an hour and a half to two hours. Consistent with an epistemology that understands the researcher’s responses as a form of knowing, immediately after each interview I made notes in my research journal, noting my reflections and responses to both the content and the process of the interview. My interview

practices arose out of my practices as a narrative counsellor but procedurally they are close to the biographical-interpretative Free Association Narrative Interview (F.A.N.I.) method (Hollway & Jefferson 2000, 2013).⁴⁹ For example, the interviews were semi-structured in that I had a list of areas I wanted to cover that I had developed in my initial project planning, but I opened them with the question “How did you see yourself in terms of having children as you were growing up?” This broadly articulated question was designed to convey a message that the kinds of responses I was interested in were those that were personal stories located in emotional, temporal, and social dimensions. From there I developed questions which were open-ended and designed to elicit a complex, nuanced story rather than a “thin, rationally driven account” (Hollway & Jefferson 2013, p.143). As each woman told her story, I noticed at what points in the narrative a certain energy was expressed—strong feelings of excitement, anxiety, anger or sadness for example—or there was some sort of disruption in a smoothly articulated story. While such energy or disruption might not tell me *what* is lodged in the story at that juncture, it usually indicates something important to the speaker. What it is may be something that is private knowledge that the speaker is unwilling to tell me, or it may be a dynamic that he or she is not yet conscious of.⁵⁰ Considered in terms of matrixial theory, it may relate to an affect or ‘sense’ that evades available language, and does not ‘make sense’. Hollway and Jefferson (2013 p.157) described the F.A.N.I. method as being “most powerful when the research question involves understanding people’s experiences through their own meaning-frame and when the area that needs to be tapped to address the research question implicates a person’s sense of self”.

Hollway and Jefferson (2013) write that critiques of the F.A.N.I. method as it was originally outlined (Hollway & Jefferson 2000) focus on a number of issues. There is a concern that in its interest in drawing on the psychic dimension of individuals’ lives there is a lack of attention to the impact of the social. The appropriateness of its focus on single case studies has been called into question, and the potential to over-interpret data is seen to be problematic. Roseneil (2010) reported a perception amongst some critics of her work that researchers who employ it often do not assume a critical perspective, especially in relation to gender and feminist issues. Thomson (2010), who was also concerned about interpretive and ethical issues, was critical of a lack of attention to the researcher’s own defences. In my own

⁴⁹ The F.A.N.I. (The Free Association Narrative Interview) method is guided by the psychoanalytic principle of free association and is designed to elicit narratives that are rich in emotional meanings for participants. Freud’s principle of free association is based in the idea that emotional significance—both conscious and often unconscious—is contained in the links between one idea and the next, as they are produced in relation to particular audiences.

⁵⁰ Spears (2005) makes this point in relation to research in a critique of Hollway and Jefferson’s work.

adapted appropriation of this method I have attempted to address these concerns throughout the thesis.

With ten women in Christchurch and three women in Wellington I conducted a second, shorter group interview of about an hour that began with a drawing exercise, as I describe below. The group interview took place after the individual interviews; in Wellington within one or two days, but in Christchurch with a gap of up to two weeks for some participants. I anticipate that this time difference will have changed the nature of the talk in some ways since some participants had longer to reflect on the issues that arose in their individual interview than others. Not all women were willing to be part of the group interview, and in two locations (Auckland and Dunedin) time and logistical constraints meant I was not able to conduct a group interview there.

These group interviews were also planned to be somewhat unstructured, in the sense that I was willing to let the conversations run if they seemed useful in terms of the key foci for the study, but the discussions focused fairly closely on the questions I had planned.⁵¹ I have experience in working with groups dealing with sensitive topics such as this in a therapeutic context, and am aware of the potential they provide for people to talk about an experience in a different way. My work as a counsellor with circumstantially childless women had highlighted a sense of isolation and invisibility in their experience as a common theme. The aim of these interviews was to facilitate a shared discussion that generated a different kind of talk because it was amongst other women whom the participants knew to share their experience in some way, and might add a further dimension to the details of that experience.

The groups were run in the early evening in a meeting room at the University of Canterbury (at Christchurch) and at the Ministry of Health (in Wellington). I welcomed the participants with juice and snacks. Mindful of people's time I was firm about keeping the interviews to one hour. The use of group interviews and of a drawing exercise within those groups was part of my application for ethics approval of this research project.

In this study I considered talking with men as well as women and I am aware that in not doing so I am contributing to "the great uncharted territory" of male infertility (Van Balen & Inhorn 2002, p.19). I decided that while some men undoubtedly experience circumstantial childlessness, theirs is a *different* (though not necessarily qualitatively 'harder' or 'easier') experience from that of women, because they are less temporally restricted in their ability to

⁵¹ See Appendix 7 on p.213 for the sets of questions I used as a loose guide to the semi-structured individual interviews, and Appendix 6 on p.212 for those I used in the group interviews.

have children biologically than women. In her study of infertility Letherby (1999, p.361) focused mainly on women, writing that “there is much historical and contemporary evidence to suggest that motherhood is a primary role for women in a way that fatherhood is not for men”. For these reasons I saw a study of circumstantial childlessness in men as a separate study which would not be adequately addressed in this project.

Transcription is an important opportunity to reflect on the interview and to ‘capture’ as much as I can of the participants’ words and non-linguistic elements of speech, but I recognize that transcription is itself a form of interpretation (Josselson 2004). After transcription I emailed the resulting text to the participants and asked them to check for any inaccuracies. Many emailed comments about the effects reading their interview had had on them, and some added a short note of something they wanted to clarify. Some women asked me to change the pseudonym I had ascribed to them.⁵² I added all of these comments at the end of their transcripts and included them in the analysis as an additional part of the text.

Drawing

I initially envisaged using the drawing exercise as a starting point for discussion between participants, as a useful strategy to facilitate participants being able to ‘pool’ their experiences as circumstantially childless women quite quickly. The exercise was very successful in these ways, but its usefulness as a tool for data gathering was limited because I used it as part of the group interview in this way. As my interest in considering non-linguistic elements of the data grew throughout the project, I became frustrated that I had not set up this exercise as a way of concluding the individual interview, because then I would have had a visual text to lay alongside an individual interview for every participant. There would be some possible disadvantages of doing it in this way; for example, in that situation there would not be a time gap in which participants might reflect on their experiences before drawing about them. It is also possible that women would make (and subsequently describe) a different drawing when their immediate audience was only me rather than other participants who shared a similar experience. However, I think these considerations would mean the drawings would have been different, but not necessarily less useful.

The drawing exercise began after participants had introduced themselves in the group interview. I introduced the exercise very carefully, stressing that its aim was to “provide another way to express yourself”, that it was “not about creating great art or a ‘good’ drawing”. I suggested they could use colours, metaphors, stick figures, words, or whatever

⁵² See Chapter 4, footnote 79, on p.93.

they chose, and told them that at the end of the time I would ask them to show and explain their drawing to the group, and that no one would be able to ask them about it or make any comments. I asked participants to find themselves somewhere quiet to work individually, and to take 10-15 minutes to make a drawing “about your experience”. The title was deliberately broad to allow for a wide interpretation. I provided each woman with a blank white A3 piece of paper and a small individual pack of twelve wax crayons in a range of colours.

I used crayons deliberately for reasons of materiality; they carried with them a number of messages about my expectations of the products of the exercise. Firstly, they were sharp enough to facilitate some detail but, in contrast with the possibilities that would have been available in felt tip pens or coloured pencils for example, they suggested that I was looking for a ‘broad brush’ response to the impulse question; a response that captured the ‘essence’ of what was important to them about it at the time of drawing. Secondly they were intended to remind participants—perhaps unconsciously—of a time in their childhood at primary school when drawing would have been a frequent and accepted form of expression for them. For many young children writing and speaking about a topic in school is anxious ‘work’, but drawing a picture is more relaxed and absorbing, and seldom assessed. My intention in evoking their childhood in this way through their bodily response to the feel and smell of the crayons was to encourage a kind of relaxed ‘visual musing’ that is akin to Bion’s (1962) notion of ‘reverie’. Of course for many adults a sense of ‘performance anxiety’ about drawing arises as soon as they are asked to draw, and the crayons were intended also to carry the reassuring message that an amateur, childlike style was acceptable in ways that ‘adult’ material such as paint and fine brushes may not have been.

I consider this experiment in using participant-produced drawing to have been very successful, although it was on a very limited scale. Only two women clearly did not find drawing enjoyable or useful in expressing their experience and used their crayons rather to write words. I have only a relatively small number of drawings (and their ‘explanations’) but each has added a dimension to the interviews that I would not otherwise have accessed.

A focus on individual cases

The analytic chapters that follow (Chapters 4, 5 and 6) are broadly informed and illustrated by cross-case findings and conceptual developments made early in analysis across the whole data set, but their analytic weight is in the detailed focus I made on individual cases. I chose this research design because I wanted to home in on the complexities rather than the generalities of women’s experiences of circumstantial childlessness and I see this approach as having the

capacity to elaborate “thickly descriptive, historically and contextually sensitive narratives” (Frosh & Roseneil 2012, p.30). The ten cases I used were chosen for the ways in which the narratives or drawings illustrated or otherwise enhanced discussion of the themes of fantasy, loss and adaptation that are the focus of my analysis. Where possible I chose cases where I had access to multiple sources of research material (interviews and a drawing).⁵³

Critics are concerned that the focus on individuals in this kind of psychosocial research inevitably obscures the social context (Hollway & Jefferson 2013). Hollway and Jefferson have contested this, claiming rather that attention to the psycho-biographical dimension of individuals’ experiences of particular phenomena adds a “level of understanding impossible to achieve without attention to the particularity of such cases” (2013, p.146). They emphasise that the purpose of case studies is not to show typicality, but rather to “explore, test and refine theoretical ideas about the relations among our core concepts” (Hollway & Jefferson 2013, p.147). Similarly Gadd and Jefferson (2007, p.6) described the use of case studies as a method for demonstrating and explicating the complex processes involved in thinking about the psychosocial subject as “not only appropriate but probably unavoidable”, because, in their view, cases are “essential” to theory-building.

Although using case studies makes it possible to work with the complexity of the data as it applies in specific cases, creating a focus on a case also inevitably involves simplifying some aspects of its complexity. My intention throughout the thesis has been to contextualize the case as much as is possible for the reader, within the limits of brevity and clarity.

3.3 A ‘psychoanalytically-informed’ psychosocial approach (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013)

In Chapter 2 I outlined the aspects of the object relations approach that inform the primary theoretical structure for this thesis. The psychoanalytically-informed psychosocial approach I have taken has informed every stage of the research process in this project. It is grounded in an ontology that in turn has implications for the epistemology I adopt, and the methods I use. Clarke (2006, p.1154) argues that it is in the development of methodological practices that a psychosocial approach has made its most significant contributions to social science research. This approach, he writes,

⁵³ To clarify, the ten cases I focused on were not the same ten women who attended a group interview. Having a drawing and transcript from a group interview as well as an individual interview was one criterion by which I chose the ten cases on which I focussed more closely, but I was also looking at cases in which the individual interview raised issues in particular detail or that contrasted markedly with other interviews. Kelly, whose interview I discuss closely in Chapter 5, is an example.

(C)an give us clearer insight into the emotional construction of the research environment and the reflexivity of the researcher; the ability of research to give voice to the research subject rather than a dominant theoretical paradigm; and the role of the unconscious in transmitting our ethnic, gendered, and class identities.

Epistemological and ethical issues

In this project I do not pay attention to issues of ethnicity and class, but Clarke's words point to other issues that are salient to the study, and it is these issues that I address in this section.⁵⁴

In the previous chapter I outlined some of the ontological tensions and debates that exist within psychosocial studies about the use of psychoanalytic theory and methodologies in social science research. Froggett and Wengraf (2004, p.95) write that psychoanalytic theory has the capacity to inform and enhance analysis of empirical data generated by narrative and biographical research for researchers who are "posing the conceptual problem of linking the subjective, the social and the societal". As I discussed in Chapter 2, however, there is critical concern with the use of psychoanalytic concepts outside of the clinical context. These concerns are exemplified in the debate around the use of the researcher's subjectivity as an "instrument of knowing" (Hollway 2009b, p.8, see also Jervis 2009; Elliott 2011; Walkerdine *et al.* 2001), a notion that closely relates to the idea of counter-transference; itself a contested term. Some analysts see counter-transference and transference as phenomena that only occur in the clinical context, while others relate them to Klein's notion of 'projective identification', which she saw as being used throughout life; an unconscious process in which an individual splits off unwanted or feared aspects of the self and projects them into an object (often another person). Parker (2010), writing critically about the extrapolation of the concepts of transference and counter-transference outside the clinical context, distinguished different versions of transference in the psychoanalytic tradition; an 'attachment' model, which he contrasts with an 'intersubjective' one, and a Lacanian version that is concerned with signification. He describes the "guiding motif" of the 'intersubjective' version—which I draw on here—as an understanding that "the relational dimension of human activity also operates as a kind of conduit for feelings that can be accessed by partners in the relationship" (Parker 2010, p.20).⁵⁵ Writing about using these concepts in the research setting, Hoggett (2008, p. 381) said:

⁵⁴ Issues of ethnicity and class, and their relationship with other issues such as participants' level and experience of education, are highly relevant to building a better picture of the experience of circumstantial childlessness (see Walkerdine *et al.* Chapter 8), but I made the decision that space limited me in exploring them adequately in this thesis.

⁵⁵ I use the term 'intersubjectivity' in the sense of "the unconscious flowing of mental states between one person and another that constantly modifies them" (Hollway 2006, p.473).

(C)entral to object relations, and to most other strands within psychoanalysis, is the idea that we communicate affectively as well as discursively, and we do this precisely because of the inherent limitations of language in expressing experience. In psychoanalysis, this idea is embodied in the notion of the transference-counter-transference.

Epistemologically this understanding fits well with my own training (in counselling) and my intersubjective and trans-subjective theoretical starting points in research. I was concerned from the outset, however, that extrapolated to a research method it fits better for researchers working as part of a team that has the capacity to share their responses than it does for a sole researcher (Josselson 2004). For this reason, although I drew on my own responses as additional data, I was cautious in using my counter-transferential responses as ‘warrant’ for even tentative analytic interpretation, and looked to other evidence to support them. An example is in my individual interview with Lynn, on which I focus at the end of this chapter, where I had a strong feeling that there was *something else* that was hovering in the space between us but not articulated. There are many reasons why such a ‘something’ might be unspoken; for example it could have been something that she was unwilling to discuss (because I was a stranger or because of a sense of embarrassment or shame perhaps), or an unconscious response of which she was unaware. A central feature of Lynn’s interview was her sense that because she felt unable to talk about her experience socially, she had difficulty making meaning of it, and she asked me to recommend a counsellor who might help her with this.⁵⁶ In the group interview, which took place a day after her individual interview, the sequence of her sense-making in her drawing, and her description of that—as I describe at the end of this chapter—suggested that my sense that there was something else, part of which was her loss of the pleasure she anticipated in breastfeeding her baby, had been accurate.

Positioning myself in the research

A feminist sensibility in research implies a recognition that researchers will always be “knottily entangled” with their participants and “ambiguously positioned both inside and outside various worlds and realities” (Burman & MacLure 2005, p.34). I am not a circumstantially childless woman and being a mother has been—and continues to be—a powerful source of identity for me. Chodorow (2003) wrote of being similarly positioned, and of the strong counter-transferential response she had when working as a psychoanalyst with women who experience deep grief and ambivalence when they find it is “too late” to have children. Roseneil (2006 p.865) writes that we “bring our selves to our research, and we make assumptions about what we study on the basis of our unique psychosocial biographies”. It was

⁵⁶ I made a list of suitable counsellors available to participants as part of the ethics strategy for the study. Lynn was the only participant who discussed the possibility of taking this up.

important that I reflected on the naturalized assumption (that women might *want* to have children) that I potentially brought to this process as a mother. Recognising this and reframing its impact helped me to shift my thinking on this project from a presumption of grief to a broader focus.

My being a mother is also implicated in my own unconscious defences and the invisible (to me) constraints they inevitably created at every stage of the research. This is a difficult problem for sole researchers in an investigation since it is in the very nature of unconscious defences that they are unavailable for reflective consideration. Once again, I see this as a limitation of working as an individual—rather than as part of a research team—in this kind of research model. I was fortunate that my supervisors brought a different perspective and experience to the project and, although this was at times challenging for me, their insights were a helpful counterbalance.

My relationships with women as a counsellor provided the initial impetus to this study, and negotiating the shift from ‘counsellor’ to ‘researcher’ and exploring the significant differences and overlaps between these two subjectivities are challenges that I have worked with throughout it. Hollway and Jefferson (2013, p.3) wrote that “(r)esearch is only a more formalised and systematic way of knowing about people, but in the process it seems to have lost much of the subtlety and complexity that we use (...) in everyday knowing”. The particular form of counselling I practice is part of my repertoire of knowing, and as a researcher this repertoire came into play in framing the research questions, establishing rapport with participants, eliciting a certain type of account from them, the reflective practices I engage in, the analysis and interpretation of the multiple texts associated with each participant, and the ethical considerations that frame the way I work. My ways of working as a counsellor have close links to an object relations approach, to narrative methods which make use of biography and life history interviews (Hollway & Jefferson 2013, 2000; Cole & Knowles 2001), and to drawing as a therapeutic tool.

In making the shift from counsellor to researcher it has often felt to me that I lost much of the “subtlety and complexity” that Hollway and Jefferson spoke of, but it was important to remember the differences between the two practices, which I understood to be primarily in their different purposes.⁵⁷ The epistemological and ontological basis for research is to generate new knowledge, where counselling and psychoanalysis have a therapeutic intent, and

⁵⁷ There are also important differences between the practices of counselling, psychotherapy, psychoanalytic psychotherapy, and psychoanalysis (the lines are contested and blurred, and there are also major differences within different counselling and psychoanalytic traditions) that I want to acknowledge here, but all are primarily therapeutic in their purpose.

are indexed to the idiosyncracies of the person seeking counselling.⁵⁸ This has implications for their practice. For example, ethically, my warrant for exploring my clients' responses as a counsellor is that this is what the client has agreed to in engaging with me; there is an understanding that my task is to help him or her explore the issues that bring him or her to counselling, that our end goal is therapeutic, and that there might be a cost in terms of emotional comfort in reaching that goal.

In practice, however, I found that even the notion of purpose was called into question in the sense that women's purposes for participating in the research did not clearly delineate between knowledge generation and therapy in this way, as mine did. Several participants told me that their motivation to be interviewed was therapeutic or for the purposes of meaning-making; a purpose which resonates with Frosh's description of the clinical psychoanalytic encounter when he says that "in few other places does a person have the opportunity to engage in a largely uninterrupted flow of talk with an attentive listener whose role it is to try to understand what is being said and to help the speaker make sense of it" (2010, p.1). Deborah, for example, said she saw the interview as "a personal development" exercise, and that seeing the transcript and my interpretation of it would be "useful and interesting" for her. It seemed that for her and other participants the interview was understood to be a therapeutic opportunity (Birch & Miller 2000) because they had so few opportunities socially to explore their responses to their childlessness. Inevitably, "as one pronounces upon experience, so the experience itself must change (...) putting something into language changes it; as we speak something shifts" (Frosh 2007, p.641-2). Birch and Miller (2000, p.90) write that the act of disclosure of something "deeply personal and private" in the interview setting may prompt a new understanding of past events in a way that may "parallel the therapeutic encounter", and conclude that researcher must consider her or his responsibilities in the co-production of accounts. Within the time I spent with participants during the interviews I managed this responsibility by drawing on my skills as a counsellor in a range of ways: to get a sense of the emotional impact of talking about their experiences for participants during the interview; to provide adequate time for participants to think about and feel their responses as they made them (making space for their agenda for the interview, as well as my own); and to draw the interview to a close in a way that did not leave them emotionally upset. Beyond the interviews, I provided a list of suitably qualified and experienced counsellors that participants could access if they wanted to explore their experiences further in a therapeutic context.

⁵⁸ This is not to say that counselling and psychoanalysis do not contribute to theoretical knowledge by virtue of reflections on and across case studies, but this is different from a research process that is not therapeutic in its primary intent.

Interpretation (and overinterpretation)

A further concern about the use of psychoanalytic concepts and practices in a research context relates to the issues of interpretation. Josselson (2004) distinguished between two approaches to the interpretation of interview data; what she referred to as the hermeneutics of restoration and the hermeneutics of demystification. From the point of view of the former, “we, as researchers, believe that the participants are telling us, as best as they are able, their sense of their subjective experience and meaning-making” (2004, p.5). The aim of the hermeneutics of restoration for the researcher is “to re-present, explore and/or understand the subjective world of the participants and/or the social and historical world they feel themselves to be living in”. In research based in a hermeneutics of restoration, attention is paid to establishing a “genuine personal encounter” in the interview, since through this “participants may evolve new levels of understanding and meaning-making about their lives, and interpretation then becomes a shared event” (Josselson 2004, p.7). Josselson emphasized that this is “not a self-evident set of processes, since grasping the multilayered subjective and intersubjective meanings of another person is riddled with potholes of potential misunderstanding” (2004, p.7), and it follows that interpretation is “not limited to direct, expressed, explicit meanings”. Ethically, the issues for a researcher attempting interpretation from the point of view of the hermeneutics of restoration revolve around faithfulness to the meanings of the participants and issues of confidentiality.

In contrast, in what Josselson referred to as the hermeneutics of demystification, “experience is assumed not to be transparent to itself; surface appearances mask depth realities; a told story conceals an untold one” (Josselson 2004, p.13). The researcher’s interpretive work is “to tear away the masks and illusions of consciousness, to move beyond the materiality of a life to the underlying psychic or social processes that are its foundation”. This analytical work is concerned with “those aspects of self-understanding or meaning-making that operate outside of the participant’s awareness” and as such, encompasses the notion of the ‘defended subject’ I posit here. Such an analysis is attuned to the multivocality of participants’ accounts and the interrelationship of various ‘voices’, as I discuss in my use of the ‘Listening Guide’ below. Josselson (2004, p.18) writes:

(I)nterpretive work involves paying attention to how the story is construed and how its parts are ordered and juxtaposed, noticing the ‘negative spaces’ of silence and omissions, and focusing on contradictions and inconsistencies. Analysis and interpretation involve reading ‘between the lines’ for indirect reference and for signs of unconscious processes.

Such interpretive acts are part of our everyday experiences of making sense of one another, as well as being a feature of more formalized contexts such as the psychoanalytic clinic.

However, ethical issues centre around inevitable power imbalances in the research process, and the potential for the researcher to “see ‘underneath’ a narrative the true significance of what the subject is saying” (Frosh 2007, p.643). He writes that this has the potential to be

individualizing, essentializing, pathologizing and disempowering; (...) organized around a pre-set discourse that imposes an expert account on the research participant in a typical (of psychoanalysis as well as psychology) ‘researcher knows best’ set of moves.

(Frosh 2007, p.643)

Arguably, few participants understand the implications of the researcher assuming interpretative authority with the products of their interviews.

In this thesis, I oscillate between these two positions. Josselson (2004, p.23) suggests that a “true combination” is “very difficult” and must consider how conscious or unconscious understandings are “weighted”. But she writes that it *is* possible, when “the interpreter is open to multiple levels of interpretation with focus on both what is said and what is not said, on both what meanings are intended and possible unintended ones”. My position is that these two approaches do not necessarily negate one another; that a psychosocial interpretation of participants’ interviews can attempt a faithful restoration of a participant’s account and also consider the meanings that “lie hidden”. A psychosocial account can “add an analysis of the individual, unconscious motives that intersect with cultural forms” (Josselson, 2004, p.23).

Attending to data beyond the spoken text

It is in the context of this position that I discuss my frustration with the “sovereignty of text” (Hollway 2009b, p.3), particularly in this project where a significant focus is on the ways in which women appear to be socially and personally constrained in articulating their experience and desires. Conventional research has privileged the words of participants as spoken in the research interview or written in other forms of data as the most valid way of accessing and communicating knowledge about the field of enquiry (Bagnoli 2009). My interest in troubling the notion of participants’ words alone as indicators of authenticity or narrative authority (Jackson & Mazzei 2009) and in visual methods of investigation is an acknowledgement that “knowledge or understanding is not all reducible to language” (Eisner 2008, p.5). I argue that considering ‘language’ more broadly in order to include non-linguistic elements and forms of communication may extend the boundaries of what constitutes ‘voice’ and provide access to a broader range of ways of understanding the complexities of human experience.

I addressed this problem primarily in two ways in this research: I mined the interviews for more of the richness and complexity about the field of enquiry than I believed attention to the text alone might offer by attending to their non-linguistic elements, and I used drawing as a way of accessing a different kind of knowledge about circumstantial childlessness. I wanted to consider transcriptions of the words participants spoke in the individual and group interviews, the para-linguistic elements of those interviews, and participants' drawings as all contributing to a range of texts that enable a more complex set of understandings of what is in play for participants as they think, feel, and articulate for themselves and others what it means to find themselves not a parent when they thought they would be one. I consider the non-linguistic and visual data not as the 'poor cousins' of written words, but as significant, valid, useful and intriguing interview material in their own right. I elaborate these two strategies theoretically further in the sections that follow.

Issues of 'voice'

In this research I move beyond an understanding that language transfers meaning or 'truth' in an uncomplicated way from one individual to another, and from a conception of the 'voice' of my participants as singular, stable, transparent, and self-reflexive. I understand each woman's voice to be multiple and her narratives to be context specific, layered in conscious and unconscious meanings, and constrained by "the exigencies of what can and cannot be told" (Britzman 1991, p.13). I see them as fraught with "the struggle to express meanings that are difficult to pin down, irreducible to one essential source, historically contingent, contextually bound, and socially constructed (Jackson 2003, p.704). My aim was to develop an analytic method that takes account of the insufficiencies of spoken language; the inevitable gap between what is said and what is experienced, the circumstances when participants feel socially constrained and so *say* one thing but *mean* another, the times when they gesture rather than speaking and so forth. Maggie MacLure (2009, pp.98-99) describes these as qualities of voice that "lie on the boundaries of language". She has captured some of the conundrums of working in this way:

(W)e need methodologies that are capable of dwelling on, and in, those very properties of voice that make it such troublesome material for research. I have in mind a kind of 'voice research' that would attend to such features as laughter, mimicry, mockery, silence, stuttering, tears, slyness, shyness, shouts, jokes, lies, irrelevance, partiality, inconsistency, self-doubt, masks, false starts, false 'fronts' and faulty memories—not as impediments or lapses to be corrected, mastered, read 'through' or written off, but as perplexing resources for the achievement of a dissembling, 'authentic' voice.

MacLure's challenge raises some of the problems for researchers who interrogate voice as I did. In attending to paralinguistic elements in this way, my intention was not privilege these elements over what is articulated in speech, but rather to add another dimension to my attention to the spoken words; as Lisa Mazzei (2009, p.46) writes, "to be faithful to the competing voices that are present towards a more complete, more nuanced, more complicated hearing of an impossibly full voice".

In analyzing participants' narratives then, in addition to what is said, my interest has focused on the things that appear to be difficult to say, that cannot be articulated in speech, or are socially forbidden or disciplined in some way. I have looked at how these things might instead be articulated through para-linguistic means such as crying or tears, stuttering in otherwise smooth speech, unexpected links in the narrative, silences and pauses, change of the tone of voice, and jokes, for example. The moments in which these paralinguistic elements are marked might be seen as possible indicators of areas where unconscious and conscious conflicts or areas of ambivalence 'leak' into the carefully maintained personal and public image a respondent has constructed of and for herself; they "make visible otherwise invisible internal states" (Hollway & Jefferson 2005, p.151). This is particularly important in a context where a woman might judge her private thoughts and feelings to be at odds with what she perceives to be socially legitimate. At times where they were unable to symbolize something in words, or felt constrained in doing so, participants struggled to articulate the chaotic complexities, the inconsistencies, the contradictions, and the messiness of their experience, but I consider that struggle itself and the places in which it occurs to be a resource for analysis.

A symphonic score

In order to have robust protocols for systematically recording and identifying various para-linguistic elements I developed a notation system, based on Bollas's (2007) notion of a symphonic score, which "imaginatively graphs" the complexity of the unconscious to record these.⁵⁹ Along with the category of language (*what* is said), he proposed that attention should be paid to the sonic dimension (*how* it is said); to elements such as timbre, pitch, volume and so forth. In discussing this notion, Bollas clarified that he intended the image to be used metaphorically rather than as an analytical tool in a clinical context, and I used it in a research context in the same spirit; as a useful way to structure my listening. Understanding silence as performative (MacLure *et al.*, 2010), I paid attention to the times and ways that women

⁵⁹ See Appendix 5 on p.211.

appeared to silence themselves. I paid attention as much to the *how* and *when* as to the *what* women were saying: having told me that they planned to have a child or children, for example, how did women talk about, or struggle to talk about not having done that? When were their narratives disrupted and what might that tell me about the social imperatives that surround this phenomenon or about the conscious and unconscious ideological conflicts a woman might be struggling with?

Using visual methods

My second strategy for moving beyond the limitations of spoken language was to use drawing as a participatory experience whose purpose is both to record and to generate understanding. Drawings are both visual products and also a process of meaning making; both a noun and a verb (Guilleman 2004, p.274). I include visual artefacts as forms of data in this study on the epistemological premise that there are “multiple forms of knowing” (Eisner 2008, p.5) and that these different forms in turn make possible different forms of representation. This premise has grown out of the “deliteralization of knowledge” (Eisner 2008, p.5) in which there is a greater recognition of the ways the social and the linguistic are closely connected and shape one another (Kress 2001). Kress (2001, pp.67-68) argues that representation—“the making of meaning”—happens at all levels. He calls for a “multimodality” that recognises that “communication and representation always draw on a multiplicity of semiotic modes of which [spoken] language may be one”.

There are several ways in which drawing offers a rich complement to spoken-language-based methods. In drawing about something—in thinking about it in visual rather than linguistic terms—people are sometimes able to access and express another dimension of their experience that is difficult to put into words; “the ineffable, the elusive, the not-yet-thought-through” (Weber & Mitchell 1995, p.5). Kress (2001, p.71) explained this accessibility in terms of the differing style of logic required:

(T)he mode of the visual makes possible forms of representing which are not available to the mode of writing, and vice versa. The visual is founded on the logic of display in space, on the simultaneous presence of elements represented as standing in specific relations to each other. The written (and the spoken much more so) is founded on the logic of succession in time, and on the sequential unfolding of events.

Gauntlett (2007, p.126) wrote that in this way drawing allows participants to “circumvent the inherent linear mode of speech” whereby one thing leads to another, and present a set of ideas “all in one go”. I have noticed that the products, and their engagement in the process of drawing, quite often surprise people and it seems possible that they are more easily—or

maybe *differently*—able to represent the relationships between complex emotions, events, relationships and metaphors for their experience holistically in a drawing. Eisner (2008, p.7) wrote that this is because “forms of feeling and forms of discursive expression are logically incommensurate”.

Creative methods offer people the possibility of communicating abstract concepts such as identity and emotions because spending time in the reflective process of making something—in this case a drawing—gives them the opportunity to consider what is particularly important to them before they generate speech about it (Gauntlett 2007). When this is followed by their own description of their drawing, it seems as if participants are then able to ‘translate’ this dimension into words that are recorded, and the pictures become visual data alongside the textual data that emerges as transcriptions from the recordings.

Lastly, it seems that the process of drawing often helps people to access and articulate a clarity about complex issues. Kearney and Hyle (2004) used participant-produced drawings in a small scale study to examine the emotional impact of change on individuals in a tertiary institution. They found that drawing helped eight out of nine of their participants to access what they (the participants) described as the “heart” or “core” of their experience and to express it succinctly. I illustrate all three of these dimensions in my discussion of Lynn’s research materials at the end of this chapter.

3.5 Analysing the texts

Analysis of the various texts produced was an iterative process where I used a number of linked methods as lenses to focus in different ways on the research questions. I moved from a ‘broad brush’ approach across the whole data set towards an in-depth interpretative analysis of individual women’s cases. My aim was to layer a number of texts generated from each participant along side one another.⁶⁰

Thematic analysis

I analyzed the spoken texts initially thematically across the entire data set. A thematic analysis has the flexibility to be applied across a range of theoretical approaches (Braun & Clarke 2006). Because there has been little written about this particular form of childlessness,

⁶⁰ Where participants had been part of a group interview as well as an individual interview five texts were available to me: transcripts from an individual interview and a group interview, their drawing, their description and discussion of their drawing, and my own field notes related to them as I worked through the research process. For those participants who had not been part of a group interview I was limited to two texts: the transcript of the interview (and any subsequent email correspondence) and my field notes.

my aim at this first stage of analysis was to develop such an account across the entire data set, rather than a detailed account of any particular theme or themes. I wanted to familiarize myself further with it as a whole, to identify patterns of relationships between important and predominant themes, and to make a rich description of the research materials, leaving a detailed account of particular aspects to the later case study analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) write that thematic analysis is a useful tool to do this, and to summarize key features of a body of data in this way.

As this is an exploratory project I was keen to organise what felt initially to be a large volume of unstructured data. I used NVivo to code the entire (non visual) dataset systematically, identifying predominant themes within the data, and developing coding categories as I worked through them.⁶¹ At this initial stage it was my intention to code for themes within the “surface meanings” (Braun & Clarke 2006, p.84) of the transcripts, rather than looking for latent themes that I might begin to theorize as underlying the explicit content of the data. In identifying themes I tried to balance a recognition of my shaping role as researcher in coding for themes which I saw as relevant to the research questions and the possibility of identifying categories or patterns that I had not anticipated; a process that began earlier during the process of gathering the texts. I found NVivo coding to be useful in ordering the data but a very ‘blunt’ tool that highlighted the inadequacies of language to capture the finer nuances of women’s words. For example, a number of women spoke about the idea of ‘settling down’, but they did so in different ways. For Connie “settled” was something one *is* (or is not). For her it was an adjective, a new way of being Connie in the world; she spoke of herself as potentially having a baby and taking on a new identity as a “settled” woman. In contrast, for Deborah “settled” was a verb, and being settled is something one *does*. She spoke of herself as continuing to be the same person, but one who was doing something different. The difference has important implications for the ways women conceptualize the changes that a potential identity as a mother might bring to them; whether they see themselves as ‘sacrificing’ their previous identity or adding to it.

Narrative Analysis

Braun and Clarke (2006, p.97) write that one of the limitations of thematic analysis is that the researcher is unable to retain “a sense of continuity and contradiction” when working with individual accounts. There was a strong temporal thread running through participants’ stories and I wanted to find a way to maintain this since it also contextualized other key issues such

⁶¹ See Coding categories in Appendix 3 on p.207.

as grief. I wanted to capture something of the contradictions and complexities of women's stories that I had elicited in the interviews and that were often narratively framed in the research data. Through the thematic analysis I identified three key interwoven threads to explore in greater depth over a smaller number of cases: choice, fantasy, and loss/grieving. A narrative analysis made it possible for me to privilege women's meaning-making in their own words, and in the context of their whole account, without losing sight of the social contexts in which they were embedded (Emerson & Frosh 2005).

The 'Listening Guide'

In order to structure my analysis of the individual cases I intended to focus on each transcript—and sometimes drawing—more closely and to analyze the interviews narratively (Hollway & Jefferson 2013; 2000; Cole & Knowles 2001), I developed a modified version of the 'Listening Guide' (Doucet & Mauthner N.S. 2008; Gilligan *et al.* 2005; Mauthner N. & Doucet 2003; Brown & Gilligan 1992). Although this method was not initially designed for psychosocial research informed by psychoanalysis, it is a flexible and adaptable approach (Mauthner 2009) which is grounded in a relational ontology that sees individuals as being "embedded in a complex web of intimate and larger social relations" (Mauthner & Doucet 1998, p.125). The process is very time intensive and, given the constraints of my study, I decided to focus on ten cases which either exemplified or offered a markedly contrasting perspective to these themes for further in depth analysis.

The 'Listening Guide' method takes a structured and methodical approach and entails formal, systematic, iterative readings of the texts, focusing on a different 'layer' each time (Mauthner 2009). I used four readings; in the first I took Doucet and Mauthner's (2008, p.405) lead and "combined the basic grounded theory question 'What is happening here?' (Charmaz 2006)" with elements from narrative analysis (recurring words, chronology of events, protagonists, plot, and so forth). My second reading paid attention to the 'I' of both the participant and me as researcher; in particular I recorded the shifts the participant made between "I", "you", and "we", and the ways in which she appeared to claim or distance herself somewhat from aspects of her 'self'. Thirdly I read for the 'voices' of the protagonists of each narrative; for the social networks and close relationships between individuals and with 'fantasy' individuals. Lastly I read for the non-linguistic elements of the data in the ways that I have previously described.

A short section from my interview with Kelly illustrates how these readings work together to open up the nuances and complexity of participants' account. Kelly told me that her partner already had two children and was unwilling to have any more because it "wouldn't be fair to

them”. Kelly emphasized that this was a logical decision, and that although she had found this difficult to accept at times in the past, she now said, “Now it’s more, um, being thankful for what I do have. Um, yeah”. However, as an apparently flippant afterword she added, “(i)t could change overnight if he was to wake up tomorrow morning and say that he wanted a child”. When I asked her how she anticipated she would feel if that happened she said, “[big breath in] Um. All of the emotions, I think I’d have all of them. I, I, you know obviously I’d be quite elated, but I’d also be very scared and apprehensive”.

Lois: So where would the elation come from Kelly?

Kelly: Um [pause] yeah, the, the, I guess those feelings that I’ve been [pause] suppressing or putting to aside. The feelings like wow, yeah, I would actually get to be a Mum [pause]. Yeah, yeah. Yep [pause] mmm [long pause]. I think that probably would be [pause] yeah [pause] it, it certainly um [long pause] yeah [pause] it certainly would be there. Yeah, I haven’t [pause] doused that flame entirely. But yeah, I would still have those feelings.

Lois: Is that the process you see, that you’ve gone through a process of kind of rationally thinking this through and, sort of dousing the little flames that flicker up as they come?

Kelly: Mmm. Mm I think that probably is it. Because I am the sort to be reasonably practical in the sense that, if you, if you dwell on something or if you wish for something that has, that, is not going to happen or whatever, that you end up digging yourself into just a big hole of depression and it’s just, it’s just not worth it. It’s not worth putting that sort of pressure on yourself.

From the first reading for the “I” in the narrative I developed a brief synopsis of the ‘plot’ of her story. This segment fits within the whole as a moment where her narrative—while often contradictory but nevertheless delivered smoothly and fluently throughout—fltered markedly. In this segment she spoke as “I” until she shifted in the last paragraph (at the repeated “if you, if you ...”) to refer to herself as “you” with an almost admonitory tone. I noticed the tenor and content of the competing ‘voices’ that these changes in pronoun suggest, and what that might tell me about the conflicts that her relationships with both other people and internalized others in her life create. In considering my own ‘I’, I read for my place in relation to the participant in the sense of audiencing, considering my own stance and the implications of this for the encounter, what attitude towards her situation Kelly might be taking for me, and what that might tell me about her perception of other social ‘others’ to it. Her earlier big breath in, her pauses and repetitions (especially of “certainly”) suggested a powerful emotional exception to her otherwise measured tone that, taken along with other parts of her interview, underlined the conflicting feelings she has about her biological childlessness and the responses of others around her to it.⁶²

⁶² I analyze this segment of Kelly’s interview further in Chapter 5, p.126

Drawing analysis

I have noted that social science research methods have traditionally privileged spoken and written words as the objects of analysis. Kress (2001, p.72) argued that modes of communication generally are changing; that “modes of language as writing, and of image are newly coming into contestation”. The visual world of the participants of this research is saturated in images, and although they may be unskilled as artists, they draw on a huge repertoire of genres and socially available images to construct their meanings. Critics of using the process of drawing in a research context are concerned that there is no shared language of images as there is (presumed to be) of spoken language sources. I contest this, and argue rather that participants generally draw on a set of simple images and styles that do generate an easily recognizable shared meaning. The common usage of stick figures and emoticons is a good example, as is the idea that red and black together are ‘angry’ colours (see Gina’s drawing on p.94).

When considering how I might analyze the drawings, a semiotic analysis would have been an obvious option since semiology is centrally concerned with the social effects of meanings such as these. Rose (2007, p.75) writes that a semiological analysis “entails the deployment of a highly refined set of concepts which produce detailed accounts of the exact ways the meanings of an image are produced through that image”. However, she is concerned about the methodological limitations of semiotics, suggesting that it is “conceptually elaborate” and “there is a tendency for each semiological study to invent its own analytical terms” (Rose 2007, p.78).

I chose instead to use a modified version of Rose’s (2007) analytical methodology, paying attention particularly to production, content and composition of the drawing. I understand all images to be “vocative” (Riley 2004); that is they address the viewer and the viewer is positioned by them (Rose, 2007). Rose (2007, pp.12-13) identified three sites at which the meanings of images are made: the site of production, that of the image or object itself, and that of its audiencing (Rose 2007, pp. 257-8). These three sites can be further understood in terms of technological, compositional and social modalities. In the participant-produced method I used, I was able to largely control elements such as the technological aspects of the production of the image (by limiting the media available) and audiencing (by setting limits on how the drawings were shown and discussed).

3.6 Conclusion

I conclude this chapter with some brief excerpts from the data associated with Lynn to illustrate the strengths and limitations of the methods I chose, and the ways in which they complement one another.

Lynn

Lynn was a 39 year old woman who had recently married a man who was unable and unwilling to have children. Her drawing demonstrated well the ways visual methods complement written (spoken) data.

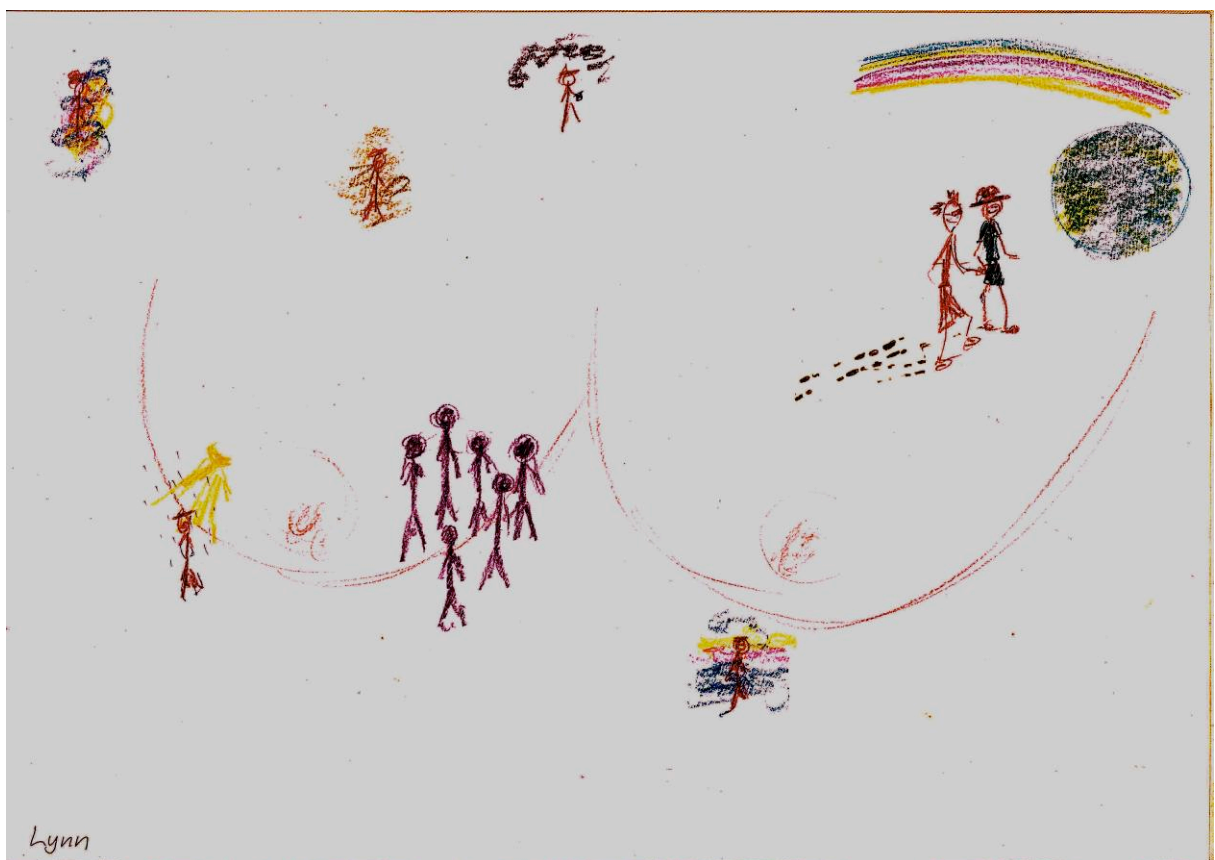


Figure 1: Lynn's Drawing

In describing her drawing to the participants in the group interview, Lynn first explained the small figures, which represented aspects of her past and of her present and imagined future life with her husband, much as she had previously described them in her individual interview with me. At the end she spoke about the larger images that dominated the drawing:

(A)nd then I sort of put some big breasts over the whole thing [little laugh] because what I always have in [pause] because I, if I really try to feel [pause] feel not having a child I think I get left with, I do have quite deep feelings of, of having missed the opportunity to nurture, and I still [pause], I still would like that experience of a baby suckling on my nipple and I, [pause] I, yeah I *feel* it quite physically, the [pause] that [pause] I sort of think of it as a loss or something like that.

Lynn's individual interview was one where she spoke happily about her relationship and somewhat more tentatively about plans for the future, a future whose happiness was contingent on her husband and their life together.⁶³ Even though she spoke positively about how happy she was in the past two years since her relationship began, grief and loss run as a leitmotif through the interview as something she had not had the chance to make sense of.⁶⁴ In her drawing this came into sharper focus. She repeated the narrative of the interview—the happy future with her husband, the isolation from other people, the previous lives and roles she had lived—“and then” “over the whole thing” she drew some “big breasts”. She began to say “what I always have in [mind?],” and moved instead to her feelings; “if I really try to feel”. “What I am left with” has the ring of the irreducible about it; that in her attempts to make sense of it all, to think her way through it and try to work out what it is that continued to trouble her about it, if she really tried she was “left” with “quite deep feelings” of having lost “the opportunity to nurture”. It seems for her that nurturing was embodied in the act of breastfeeding, but she did not simply say “breastfeeding”; it was not just the act of nurturing through the provision of milk that she longed for.⁶⁵ Instead she chose words that are rich in considered detail and evocative of a sensual experience of an intimate relationship between her and a baby: “I still would like that experience of a baby suckling on my nipple”. The power of this image for her was shown in the symbol she chose to express it in her drawing. Unlike most of the other women who used stick figures to represent themselves, in Lynn's drawing it is not the figure that represents her that is centred on the page. Instead the two huge, full pink breasts with detailed nipples are perfectly centred, dwarfing all the rest of the figures on the page. That missed experience was something she “feels quite physically”, but she had difficulty naming it; “a loss or something like that”.

When she “put some big breasts over the whole thing” Lynn was able to present both the content of her individual interview and another, powerful dimension of this experience as existing simultaneously, and to use composition and relative size to evoke relevance for her. The viewer relates differently to the small figures—which all appear to be walking away—than to the breasts, which belong to a woman who faces slightly obliquely, but still directly out to the viewer; almost intimately close. The drawing, and her description of it (*‘I feel it quite physically’*), suggest the extent to which the fantasy of her potential maternal

⁶³ I analyze this segment of Lynn's research materials more fully in Chapter 6, p.175)

⁶⁴ In Chapter 6 I discuss this not-making-sense in participants' data as a possible expression of the matrixial dimension of their lives.

⁶⁵ Lynn's drawing has a powerful symbolization if looked at through the lens of Kleinian object relations theory. Klein (1956/1986, p.215) wrote that “the breast in its good aspects is the prototype of maternal goodness and generosity, as well as creativeness. All this is felt by the infant in much more primitive ways than language can express it”.

subjectivity, while not an embodied fantasy, is rather a fantasy of embodiment, in a way her spoken language in the interview had not conveyed. She described the making of the drawing in a sequential way (“and then”). This suggests that it may for her have been a process of meaning-making; a realization that the loss of the opportunity to experience nurturing through breastfeeding for her was the “core” of her experience. In terms of composition, her “big breasts”—contrasting with the tiny figures of the rest of the drawing and placed in the very centre of her picture—suggested the way in which this fantasy of embodiment was indeed “over the whole thing” for her.

Lynn’s research materials are an example of the way my research strategy of using both individual and group interviews gave an added dimension to this study. It seems likely that the different form of expression available to her in drawing—rather than speech—made it possible for her to introduce this dimension. Given the vocative quality of images (Riley 2004) however, it may be that she used this opportunity of being among others in a similar situation to explore this dimension of her experience in a way that would not have been possible in an individual interview with me.

An extract from her individual interview illustrates both the advantages and limitations of the method I devised to pay attention to non-linguistic elements. In it Lynn talked about a feeling of loss that she felt about not having had a child, particularly when she was around her husband’s family.

Lynn: And feeling this absence of children [pause] in the family, there *are* no children in the family. And [pause] yeah [pause] umm [pause]. And his, his mother’s [pause] kind of very umm, reluctant admittance how much she’d love to have a grandchild and [pause] umm, [pause]. My husband’s quite a lot *older than me*, and feelings of I suppose, wanting to [pause] to have a, a, a little [pause and a small nervous laugh] umm [pause] *him*, in a way. [shaky voice]

Lois: To continue on?

Lynn: [immediately] Yeah, yeah in a way, so I have those sorts of feelings [pause] mmm.

The notation system I devised meant that I could record and compare elements such as sighs, gasps and repetitions across the entire dataset. I was most interested however, in the patterns they made across each individual interview, and the times in which they occurred in relation to the story that was being told. For example, throughout her interview, Lynn used a small self-deprecating laugh at times in the interview when she was discussing issues about which she said she was concerned with other people’s responses (having had two abortions for example). The pattern that arose is that for Lynn, a particular small laugh appeared to be used to soften the impact of her words for me, her audience; to make them a little more

‘acceptable’. When she laughed in this way at her suggestion that having a child would give her a “little *him*” her laugh, pauses (in otherwise smooth uninterrupted speech) and repetition of “a, a, a” suggested that she felt uncomfortable about saying this. While I cannot know *what* is lodged in this discomfort, taken along with her tearful voice there is evidence that this idea has a strong emotional impact for her. I learn something of the ways in which Lynn experienced circumstantial childlessness as a loss and the judgment she anticipated to that loss by looking at the patterns of where and how these moments of impact occur in her interview. Taken together the data emphasized the privately held nature of these responses to circumstantial childlessness, and the perceived social inhibitions that support this.

This extract of Lynn’s narrative represents a time when she is not retelling a familiar story, as she is elsewhere in the interview, but rather making meaning for herself (and me) of her experiences of circumstantial childlessness, within our encounter. There is a strong sense of the relational in both her drawing (and its description) and the interview segment. For Lynn in these segments, the ‘negative space’ of her absent child is filled with powerful presences: a transformation to her husband’s family; a longed-for grandchild for her mother-in-law; the intense sensual pleasure of nurturing through suckling a baby at her breast; and a way to perpetuate something of a loved husband on into her life after his death. Read in the context of the whole of her interview, it stands out as exemplifying the contradictions and conflicts this experience creates for her.

In this chapter I have discussed the methodology I have chosen and the methods I have developed to investigate the relationship between fantasy, loss and grieving in these participants’ experiences of circumstantial childlessness. I discussed how I have paid particular attention to finding ways to capture the “things that slip and slide” in these participants’ accounts. These are things that are difficult to think and articulate; they are often unconscious and sometimes socially unspeakable. Frequently they were related to the evanescent quality of these womens’ fantasies of maternity and a child, and it is to these that I turn first in the three analytic chapters that follow.

Chapter 4: Maternal fantasies and the ‘absent presence’ of unborn children

People romance about their children long before they are born—long before and long after. They name them and rename them. They see them as their second chances, ‘a chance to get it right this time’, as if they were able to give birth to themselves. (...) Motives are seldom simple and never pure.

(Mantell 2003, p.228)

4.1 Introduction

“The sense of myself as a mother”

In the introductory chapter to this thesis I focused on an extract from Deborah’s individual interview in which she spoke about her difficulty in relinquishing “the sense of myself as a mother”. Her use of a present tense (as opposed to a past perfect one, conditional on her having had a child; the “sense of how I might have been as a mother”) suggests that in some way Deborah experienced herself to be *already* a mother. She spoke about her realization that, since she would not now embody her maternity, she needed in some way to abandon that aspect of herself.

Deborah’s “sense” makes *no* sense logically—Deborah does not have children biologically or socially—but her words were unequivocal, so how might they be interpreted? Quite by accident, I encountered further data that illuminated this question. Some two thirds into the project I wrote a paper (Tonkin 2012) that addressed the ‘haunted’ quality of the relationships participants had with their unborn child. I quoted Deborah in it, and since she had requested that I send her anything published out of the research, I sent her a copy of the article. She replied:

I do feel the paper gives voice to something I feel. I read it with gentle tears. I can hear the voices of Alisdair James and Elinor Elizabeth too, as though they are ‘down the back’ (the term we used at home when I was a child to mean playing on the farm somewhere distant from the house but never far enough away we couldn’t hear the cowbell signalling it was time to come home for a meal or some other reason). We didn’t ever name my ghost children in the interview; like other women I do name my unborn children too.

Deborah’s response said a lot about the nature of the ‘absent presence’ of her fantasy children in her life. These children whose voices she ‘hears’ had names that appeared to be carefully chosen, but in giving permission for me to use them, Deborah explained that they would not

be identifiable since they “are personal to me (no one else, not even my husband, knows them)”, highlighting the very private, often secret nature of these relationships. She added:

(I)n some ways using the names gives my ‘down the back’ children a validity or reality I’m pleased to gift them (and myself). [...] I realise that I continue to ‘mother’ Alisdair and Elinor because I give them life in my head. As I age I seem to think of them less often but some events certainly bring them back into a ‘ghostly’ (in the sense of ‘hazy’) focus—and interestingly it is more their voices than a visual picture of them.

For Deborah, my use of the names of what she refers to as her “unborn children” gave a “validity or reality” that they had previously lacked when they existed only in the privacy of her imagination; it suggests that for her, these imagined children who *already* had an existence “in my head” were called into a *further* existence as part of the social world by my naming them in this thesis. Perceiving this as a “gift” that she and I could give them is reminiscent of the idea of ‘giving birth’, and she underlined this by speaking of giving them life. Although she could not give these imagined children life through giving physical birth to them as embodied infants, she nevertheless appeared to understand herself to have given them a continuing life by creating them in her fantasy, and maintaining their existence in her thoughts. She saw it as a gift to her “unborn children” to make them more real in this way, and to herself to honour the maternal subjectivity she claimed in continuing to “mother them”. Although she was ‘childless’, Deborah perceived herself to be in some *sense* a mother with a relationship to the children of her fantasy.

Her use of the words “down the back” elaborated this fantasy powerfully in several ways. She positioned her fantasy children within her broader family through reference to a term whose relevance and meaning everyone in her family would apparently understand. In this way, she highlighted the existence of the children within her own locus of belonging in her family of origin; for her they were part of her family culture. For Deborah, the term suggests that, even if others in her family did not know of the ‘existence’ of Alisdair and Elinor, her fantasy children were not only hers, but also members of her wider family; for her they too had a claim on the meanings of “down the back” for that family, just as her embodied nieces or nephews do, even if no one else in the family knew of their existence.

“Down the back” gave a sense of ‘where’ her unborn children ‘are’ spatially for Deborah; it is a term that evoked a place that was always intimately connected to “home” and to the day-to-day events of the family, and yet at the same time was distant and unseen (though within earshot). One senses that in Deborah’s family, “down the back” was a place where the children were understood to be mostly happily and safely engaged in playing together while their parents were busy with the other parts of their life. In envisaging her fantasy children in

this place, Deborah elaborated her “sense” of how her children ‘exist’ in relationship to her; co-existent with her life, unseen, but ‘heard’, distant but safely within the bounds of the intimacies and sense of belonging of “at home”.

Lastly, in her shift from “I” to “we” (“we used at home”) Deborah moved viewpoints; from positioning herself as a child playing with her siblings “down the back” to her mother’s viewpoint of summoning the children “home for a meal”.⁶⁶ As I noted in Chapter 2, Hollway (2009a, p.3) uses the term “generational pivot” to describe the process whereby new mothers are able to draw on experiences in their own infancy and in this identification, relate “both with their mothers (as babies) and their babies (as mothers)”. This process relates to what Bollas (1987, p.2) termed the “idiom of care” and which might be understood to mean care, not just of the infant but of the older child as well. It is through this shift of viewpoints that Deborah was able to position herself both as a mother (to her fantasy children) and as a child (to her embodied mother).

In this chapter I develop this notion of a fantasy dimension to ‘mother’ through analysis of the ways it manifests itself in the narratives and drawings of the circumstantially childless women in this study. I begin with a general discussion of fantasies of maternity and of children that draws on research material from all the participants. In the second part of the chapter I engage in a detailed study of the five texts associated with Maree who was the youngest participant, and who—as far as she knew—still had the potential to have a child.⁶⁷ Through this discussion, I indicate how her story captures some of the key elements of the complex relationship between these maternal fantasies and the dominant contradictory narratives of female identity in relation to mothering and motherhood. Finally, I conclude with a theoretical discussion of the issues raised.

4.2 Fantasy: a fourth dimension to ‘mother’

I introduced this chapter with an unexpected glimpse of Deborah’s fantasy of maternity and children because it exemplified several qualities of these fantasies that were apparent across the research material: they were intense, detailed, extremely private and often secret, appearing almost by accident, and often very strongly ‘present’ in the interviews but ephemeral and slippery in analysis. Conceiving of Deborah as *already* in some “sense” a mother requires a specific understanding of ‘fantasy’. Rather than the popular understanding

⁶⁶ Of course it is possible that it was her father, not her mother that summoned her in this way, but other sections of Deborah’s interview suggested that her parents largely operated within traditional gender roles.

⁶⁷ Maree took part in both an individual and group interview, completed a drawing and described her drawing. My case notes make the fifth element of the data associated with her.

of fantasy as “what you get up to when the surveying mind and surveying society are both looking the other way” (Rose 1996, p.2), it entails one that holds it to have a powerful reality which Jacqueline Rose (1996, p.3) writes is not “antagonistic to social reality” but rather is “its precondition or psychic glue”, and which encompasses both unconscious and conscious processes. Stone (2012, p. 28) articulates this understanding of fantasy in this way:

Our lives are structured by ingrained webs of fantasizing and wishing, so ingrained that we scarcely notice them, although they saturate how we perceive, act, and relate to others.

While Stone’s description gives a good sense of the ways in which fantasy permeates our lives, it glosses over the nuances of “fantasizing” in its emphasis on “wishing”. The understanding of fantasy that I propose here is broad enough to encompass a number of overlapping dimensions: unconscious fantasy (which includes primal fantasy), fantasy in the sense of creative ‘imagining’ in a way that relates to Winnicott’s concept of ‘transitional phenomena’ and ‘transitional space’, and his use of ‘fantasying’.⁶⁸ For example, Deborah’s talk of her fantasy of Elinor and Alisdair describes her consciously experienced “imaginative exploration of the world” (Winnicott 1971, p.27), and also takes in the unconscious mesh of fantasies that have developed out of her relationships (particularly with her mother). Much of this latter material is by its very nature inaccessible to her in symbolized form.

There appears to be a dimension of fantasy that women are previously unaware of, but which becomes available to conscious reflection through exploring the issues of circumstantial childlessness as part of the research process. Deborah’s “sense” of herself as a mother may have been part of this process of incipient awareness, since she wrote about it after taking part in the interview, reflecting on her transcript, and reading my published work which analyzed an aspect of it.^{69 70} I relate this possibility to Winnicott’s notion of a ‘transitional space’ and ‘transitional phenomena’, which he theorized provided a “bridge between inner and outer worlds” (Phillips 2007, p.114).⁷¹ It may be that Deborah’s interactions with me in the context of research were able to function at times as a transitional space for collaborative exchange in a way that resonates with (but is not the same as) the way Winnicott understood the clinical

⁶⁸ For a more full explanation of my use of these terms see Chapter 2, p.30.

⁶⁹ I discuss the ways in which women talk about a social invisibility about the experience of circumstantial childlessness inhibiting their understanding and exploration of it in their own lives in Chapter 5. Other writers (e.g. Birch & Miller 2000) have written about the therapeutic potential that participating in research might provide for individuals. While this is a very different process from psychotherapy, it nevertheless provides an opportunity and an audience to explore aspects of their experience through narrating it in a different way. One of the participants in this project (herself both a researcher and a counsellor) referred to her interviews as “free counselling”.

⁷⁰ Further email correspondence with Deborah adds weight to this analysis, as I explain in Chapter 7.

⁷¹ I discuss Winnicott’s concept of the ‘transitional space’ in Chapter 2, p.30.

psychoanalytic setting to do. Winnicott (1971, p. 2, italics in original) wrote that the transitional space in which children play and adults talk is:

an intermediate area of *experiencing* to which inner reality and external life both contribute [which exists as] a resting place for the individual engaged in the perpetual task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet inter-related.

As well as a reconsideration of ‘fantasy’, a shift in understanding meanings of ‘mother’ is also necessary. In a consideration of the biological, psychological, cultural and sociological implications of new reproductive technologies, Welldon (2006, p.70) writes “(w)e have to adjust our understanding of ‘mother’ to cover three distinct categories—genetic, gestational, and carer”.⁷² I propose ‘fantasy’ to be a further dimension to this understanding. Just as a woman becomes a mother through having a child, so this fantasy of maternity becomes possible because of the relationship, in fantasy, to a child or children. Understanding ‘mother’ in this way entails a shift whereby maternity is not exclusively indexed to the embodied existence of a child, and a woman therefore either ‘is’ or ‘is-not’ a (biological or social) mother. This is not to say that I am suggesting that all women ‘are’ mothers if they imagine themselves to be, but rather to acknowledge that women’s conscious and unconscious fantasies of maternity and a child or children have a powerful significance—a *further* reality—that is a precondition of the social reality of a maternal identity, that shapes their experiences of maternity if they go on to have a child, and that has the potential to create material and emotional effects in their lives even *before* they become mothers in genetic, gestational or care-giving terms. However, since fantasy is popularly cast as somewhat frivolous, and because much of our fantasy may be unavailable to conscious awareness, the importance of these fantasies is not recognized, and the opportunity to explore them is limited.⁷³

Fantasies of ‘mother’, and mothers’ fantasies

Mantell’s epigraph, written in the context of her own unintended childlessness, highlight the unconscious dimensions to the ‘romancing’ women do in constructing maternal fantasies and to the reproductive choice-making all women do. It also addresses the question of the idiosyncratic meanings having a child and being a mother have for each woman. Those meanings are inextricably linked to the relationship women have to their own mother, and to

⁷² Other writers (eg Letherby 1999) refer to ‘social’ mothers rather than ‘carer’ to describe women who are in a mothering role to children to whom they have not given birth.

⁷³ Fantasies of parenthood exist for both men and women. My exclusive focus on women’s experience is not intended to imply that men’s fantasies of paternity are not equally (albeit differently) important. In Chapter 5 I discuss the difficulties the women in this study had in exploring and making sense of these fantasies more fully.

her past and present desires and anxieties. Because every woman is both a daughter as well as a potential mother, she is the embodied product of her own mother's "romance" with a fantasy child; the often unwitting and sometimes unwilling accomplice in her mother's plan to compensate for losses and disappointments of her own life, and the object of her mother's longing to, and for, love. She could also wish to reproduce the pleasure of loving a child, first experienced through being loved as a child herself.

The complexities of crossgenerational fantasies and one of the mechanisms through which they might pass from a woman on to her child are described here by British object relations psychoanalyst Alice Balint:

I have found that much more than the mother's general mood is absorbed by the very young infant, who reacts, for example, to her aliveness or deadness and to unconscious anxieties, which do not necessarily arise from the relation between the mother and baby. What can be perceived by the infant and internalized by him are aspects of the mother's unconscious life, that is to say, aspects of her mental life of which she herself is unaware. [...] One way of describing this is in terms of unconscious projection. The essential point, however, is that in trying to understand a woman one has always to be in touch with three generations: the patient, the patient's parents and the parents' parents, that is the patient's grandparents.

(1992, pp.110-111)

In this way, the lives of participants can sometimes be also understood to be embodying their mothers' fantasies of *not* having had a child.⁷⁴ Lesley, for example— who spoke of her unhappy relationship with her mother throughout her life— travelled in her 20s and early 30s, and said she delayed having children because "I really felt that I needed to sort myself out and that I could see aspects of my mother within me, and I was determined to not [...] recreate what my mother had created". Describing herself as "the product of a relationship where my mother didn't want to be a mother", she told me:

I feel that I have actually lived the life that my mother would have wanted to live; [...] my mother married when she was 21, had me when she was 24, and she was not really well suited to being a mother at that point. You know she had a lot of stuff from her own family to sort out, so she was a reluctant [pause], I mean look it would have been much better if she'd just hadn't gotten married, if she'd travelled, done what she really wanted to do, and perhaps met my father later on, seen a therapist, kind of got herself sorted out. It would have been a much more different life.

Lesley was explicit about her own yearning to have a child, and it is impossible to untangle here whether she found herself instead living her mother's fantasy, or her own fantasy *for* her mother, and hence the "very different life" that might have been her own, as well as her

⁷⁴ Several participants said that during their growing up their mothers had explicitly emphasized that *not* having children was an option available to them. I can only speculate about the part the historical context played in participants' circumstantial childlessness. These women are the daughters of the first generation of women to have more reliable reproductive choices, and were raised in the early years of second wave feminisms.

mother's. I suggest this is because they overlap, even though they might find different expression in each woman's life. Hollway's (2009a, p.6) claim that the relationship between a woman and her daughter continues to be intersubjectively "porous" throughout their lives suggests that their mothers' fantasies continue to play a part unconsciously in adult daughters' lives in the same way as they do when they are infants. Perhaps these fantasies materialize in different ways in the two generations, in part reflecting cultural changes in attitudes to maternity and women's lives. Other women in this study also made the link between their mothers' experiences and the ways these experiences may have contributed to their unconscious fantasy of maternity. Julia, whose mother had two miscarriages and two stillborn children, commented that she had grown up "surrounded by dead babies", and though she spoke with tremendous sadness about not having had children, also said, "I mean in some ways [having children] terrified me".

The mother/daughter relationship is pivotal to the development of a woman's maternal fantasy in terms of its impact on daughters in another way. Lax (2006) writes that, although pressures in a girl's broader social worlds are an important part of what she describes as the "craving" to have a child, her conscious and unconscious interaction with her mother is a "uniquely significant contributory factor". She understands the interactions between a girl and her mother to be central to the development of a woman's fantasy of maternity:

This pivotal relationship of love and idealization, anger, hate, envy, and competition, which undergoes many vicissitudes, eventually forms the basis for a girl's ideal of motherhood. When the woman's childhood experiences were good, identification with her own mother is the basis for this ideal. When childhood memories are filled with anger and pain, ambivalence prevails and the ideal may be determined by reaction formations. However, the ideal of motherhood also unconsciously contributes to the wish for a child, a fantasized opportunity to play out the role of mother and child in an unambivalent idealized form desired in the woman's childhood. In this fantasy the woman wants to be the mother she wanted to have.

(Lax 2006, p.3)

Many participants' narratives in this study reflected the idea of motherhood being "a chance to get it right this time", as Mantell (2004, p.228) wrote in the epigraph. Janine, for example, said, "I would like to have had the opportunity to be a different type of mother to the one I had [...] I would be perceptive and, um, more, um, [pause] more aware and more [pause] nurturing and more focused". In her fantasies of being a mother a baby perhaps offered the possibility to "heal the shortcomings of her own childhood" (Parker 2005, p.27), where the baby would stand in for her baby self, and she could become "the mother she wanted to have".

Anxious fantasies

Mantell's idea of "romance" underplays a further dimension of maternal fantasies; those aspects of 'mother' that are laden with anxiety and ambivalence. De Marneffe (2006, p.244) writes that to some women "the desires associated with wanting to mother feel uncontrolled, overwhelming, and regressive, emotionally and politically". In spite of the emancipatory changes that feminism has brought to women's lives, socially motherhood is still both valorized as an important part of being a woman and also feared as a threat to the independent, interesting and fulfilling life women aspire to. She further notes that "(f)or some young women struggling toward a sense of identity, it is not surprising that motherhood comes to symbolize everything antithetical to the independent life they want to pursue" (De Marneffe 2004, p.16). Many of the participants' narratives in this study were threaded with these and other anxieties, and their fantasies of maternity thus have both 'positive' and 'negative' dimensions. They are weighted with all that 'mother' and 'baby' means for each participant; what she anticipates she would gain, what she would lose, what she fears and what she desires. In Lesley's interview, for example, her fears appeared to centre not only on what sort of mother she might unwillingly (and unwittingly) become, but also about her ability to provide the 'right' circumstances in which a child might flourish happily. Her fantasies of mothering were often expressed in terms of what she was anxious to avoid:

Lesley: I didn't want to bring a child into the world where I felt like I would be struggling and that I would be trying to be a parent as well as work, as well as trying to juggle financial things. I didn't want to bring up a child where I was living in a rundown old house which was [pause] struggling to find money for food and having to rely on my parents for top-up things, and be like that for 20 years. That's not a life, and I just don't feel [pause] that wasn't a life that I wanted to bring a child into [shaky tearful voice] [pause] that I couldn't do that.

Lois: So you had choices around it in that you made decisions about the kinds of circumstances and environment under which you would have a child?

Lesley: Yeah. And if I couldn't create those [pause]. And certainly in my 20s there was a feeling like I don't want another child like me who's incredibly sensitive and [pause] because at that stage I really felt like the world was [pause] not necessarily dangerous, but not a caring place for sensitive children, or sensitive people, and that, for me to bring another little being into the world who was again supersensitive, well what [pause] would she or he ever thank me for that?

Here Lesley shifted her identifications, in a way that recalls Hollway's (2009a) notion of a "generational pivot", between her own perspective, her mother's, and her fantasy child's. She appeared to anticipate (in fantasy) what it would be like to be a mother herself, if she was the object of her child's anger in the same way as her mother had been of hers. Parker (2005, p.28) notes that the "welcome fantasy of motherhood invokes a dual identification—with the

mother who cares *and* with the baby who is cared for, with the container *and* the contained”. Lesley’s concerns are the flipside of this “welcome” fantasy, but the dual identification is evident in her words. From an object relations perspective it is important to stress that just as the mother a child perceives should not be understood in an empirical sense but is rather filtered “through the prism of his (*sic*) fantasies” (Stone 2012, p.22), so too are the associated cultural resources. In Lesley’s case these resources include images and discourses of struggling single mothers, and of the hypersensitive individual.⁷⁵ For her, and for other women in this study, these cultural resources also include other aspects of the contradictory social discourses both of being a ‘woman’ and being a ‘mother’, in which each young woman is immersed as she grows (Walkerdine *et al.* 2001), and the range of different maternal identities (Thomson *et al.* 2011) within which she anticipates positioning herself—or being positioned by others—if she has a child in the future.

The ‘absent presence’ of fantasy children

Many of these participants articulated their maternal fantasies primarily around the idea of being a mother in general terms, and although they may have had detailed fantasies of a child or children, these did not appear in the research materials associated with them.⁷⁶ Others described their fantasy child or children and their interactions with them in quite specific ways and contexts, often in very vivid terms. Like Deborah, some women had named their fantasy child(ren) as a way of making them ‘real’ by symbolizing them in language. Shelley for example, who for a time considered adopting a child, said, “I gave her a name, and that was my biggest mistake. I called her Sophie, and, she was human, she was real”.

Connie had not named her children, but spoke of her fantasy children in this way:

Connie: Well I always thought I would have a family, of my own, and for a long time I thought I would have two boys.

Lois: Did you have names for your boys, in your mind?

Connie: No but they always had dark short hair, liked climbing trees and things like that.

Lois: You saw them as kids rather babies.

⁷⁵ Elain Aron’s book *The highly sensitive person* (1997) and its sequel *The highly sensitive child: Helping our children thrive when the world overwhelms them* (2002) were extremely successful commercially and increased public awareness of the idea that some individuals are particularly sensitive to a range of stimulæ.

⁷⁶ It was not until I was well into the interviewing phase and moving into the analysis phase of this study that I became aware of the ‘presence’ of these fantasies of a child in the lives of many of these participants. I had not asked any questions specifically designed to elicit talk about these fantasies, but a significant number of women spoke of them in the way that Connie does in this extract.

Connie: Yes, as children. As real boys. Yeah.

Connie presumably meant that these children were real boys in the sense of liking to climb trees and play actively, but in her detailed imagining of them they also appeared to be real to her in the sense of her having a vivid fantasy picture of them. Connie talked about herself as having spent the past few years in a complex and painful process of temporarily relinquishing that picture. She told me that during that time she had visited a medium to ask about her boys:

I said ‘I’ve had this, this, this *vision* for such a long time and now it turns out it’s not going to happen. Is it just my imagination? Just to give myself, you know, peace, or is it some truth in there? What do you think?’⁷⁷ And she said, ‘Well I can see those children too, those boys, and even though they’re not with you here now there is a connection and they do support you’ [crying] but she said, ‘It’s going to be unlikely that you have them in this lifetime’.

Connie appeared to find it difficult to describe the nature of her relationship with these boys of her fantasy. Though she spoke smoothly, she stumbled over “this, this, this *vision*”. This struggle may have been because the possibility of these children existing *in some way* is not socially recognized, and yet that was her experience. They were “there and not-there”, and her struggle was with the conflict between “what we see and what we know” (Gordon 1997, p.24); between her ‘inner’ reality, and ‘reality’ as it is understood in her social worlds. When she did find the word “vision” however, it was not a vague ‘idea’ that she spoke of, but rather one that had the weight of what she in some way, *saw*.

Elena is another woman who talked in terms of her child already existing on another plane or in another time, as Connie did. Although I did not ask a specific question that was planned to elicit discussion about it, 11 of the 26 participants spoke explicitly of a belief in the possibility that their fantasy child(ren) might be embodied as their biological child, later in their lives or in a future life. Setting aside the question of religious belief systems about reincarnation, one possible reason for women talking of their child in this way is that there are few available narratives to talk about a relationship with a child who exists in fantasy rather than in an embodied form, but *feels* in some way ‘real’. I asked Elena, “(H)ow real is the child? How much have you imagined that child? ”

Elena: Oh you know it’s all, already here, to be honest with you. It’s not that I can see it’s a boy or a girl, or it’s called [pause] you know, but it’s, I have a—it sounds ridiculous but I have a sense of [pause] this child. Because I, I think of you know [pause] the souls, and I think of [pause] um [pause] because I, I believe in reincarnation don’t ask me why or how, it just sort of makes sense to me, to me you know that souls are reborn—um [pause] I sort of think, yeah [pause] it, it, it’s there, you know? [pause] um [pause] it’s there. It’s somewhere, it’s with me.

⁷⁷ English is not Connie’s first language, and although she speaks it fluently, she made some unusual sentence constructions such as this at times.

Elena's talk was full of uncertainty and anxiety about how I might hear it. In commenting that "it sounds ridiculous" she was fearful of my judgment of her "sense of this child", for example, perhaps because as her audience I stood in for the wider social world. Her use of "to be honest with you" could be interpreted as appealing to me to be accepted as speaking as a sincere and truthful person, even though she feared that what she said might be perceived as unlikely or socially invalid. Elena clearly struggled to articulate *how* or *where* this child existed, but she was clear that it *did*, in some way.

Elena's talk about her fantasy revealed another dimension to women's fantasies of a child. When I asked her what would be lost if she did not have a child as she planned she said:

I feel like it will be part of me, to be honest with you. That I have lost a part of me that I have already sort of accepted.⁷⁸ It's part of you know [pause] yeah I, I [pause]"

Lois: "Can you describe that part of you? Can you tell me about it?"

Elena: [sigh] "I don't know, it's sort of [pause] because of course your child [pause] is a separate person, you know, but I think in the first years [pause] the mother and the child, they *are* connected. Very much. You know the child is [pause] doesn't survive without the mother, um, so [pause] I don't know.

When a woman gives birth she is immediately confronted with the embodied *otherness* of her child, and she faces the task of reconciling that baby with the baby of her fantasy (Mauthner 2002). When a woman does not have a child, her fantasy is able to remain intact, as "part of" her. Elena's struggles to articulate the contradictory way in which a child is both "a separate person" and yet "connected" relate to this intersubjective positioning whereby the child of her fantasy is both her and not-her. Unless and until it is embodied, Elena's child is fixed in her fantasy, unchallenged by a different reality.

The ways in which women's relationship with their fantasy child(ren) spilled over and created material effects in their social worlds was evident in many participants' narratives.

"Everything is in the shape of a baby", Janine commented as she looked around her home during our interview. When I asked her what it meant to her not to have a child she replied, "(i)t's, it's empty and it feels like there's something missing; it feels like there's *someone* missing". When women lived with a partner, some aspects of the fantasies sometimes became shared. Isabella said that she had always wanted to have a child, but she had not found

⁷⁸ English is also not Elena's first language. It is hard to know whether her saying "That I have lost a part of me" (rather than "that I will have lost") is a product of this, or an unconscious recognition that her chances of successfully conceiving and birthing child were small, and she was probably already facing that loss. At the time of the interview Elena was in her late 30s and planning to try for a child through A.R.T. as a single parent. She was, however, out of work, and not eligible for government funding for treatment, so had delayed it indefinitely.

anyone she was able to form a relationship and start a family with until she met William in her mid 30s.⁷⁹ William was willing to have a child together but at the time of the interview Isabella (by then in her late 30s) had not conceived because of “unexplained infertility” (presumed age-related). She talked about the child they hoped to have:

We see ourselves as having a daughter [...] I always threaten that she’s going to be a horse rider and William is going to have to go to equestrian events and you know, brush the pony’s tail, and things like that. [pause] Yeah, she is quite real. [...] She [pause] I always sort of [pause] we talk about her, and we just, yeah feel that, it’s meant to be [pause]. Yeah. [...] She *is* somewhere.

Berger and Quinney (2005, p. 13, italics in original) write that “(w)hat constitutes a ‘family’ is very much a social construction. For many people, family constitutes not just a *presence* but an *absence* as well”. Isabella’s words suggested that her fantasy child became more real through being one she shared with William, and was for them in some “quite real” ways a presence in their household. Along with the materiality of the ‘little bits and pieces I have packed away’ for her to wear, Isabella and William’s talk about their anticipated daughter brought her into existence in their daily life and into the detail of their possible futures. I sensed a shift from a playfulness between them about what was understood to be an imagined future where their daughter might be a horse rider (“I always threaten”) to a different conceptualization of her in the present, where Isabella’s pauses and hesitations pointed to her struggling—as Elena had—in a more serious way to articulate *how* and *where* her daughter existed. Like Elena, Isabella concluded with a firm assertion that she ‘*is*’.

Elena used the word “sense” to describe her perception of the child of her fantasy—“I have a *sense* of this child”—in the same way as Deborah did when she spoke about “the sense of myself as a mother”. It is hard to know how to interpret the ‘*isness*’ of these fantasies that is implied in their use of “sense”, Connie’s use of “vision” and Isabella’s use of “is”, in this way. Perhaps in choosing these ways to describe their fantasies of maternity and a child—as opposed to an ‘idea of this child’ for example—these four women might be understood to be deliberately attempting to articulate an *experience* of a particular kind of reality for these fantasies, that is hard for them to express. Frers (2013, p. 433) writes that as something that is experienced, an absence is “not just immaterial, a mere thought without an anchor in the corporeal world”, but rather it “arises in the experience, it is a relational phenomenon that

⁷⁹ In Chapter 3 I addressed the difficulties of capturing the “things that slip and slide” of fantasy in this research process. As an example of the ‘did I see that or did I imagine it’ kind of thinking that so often happened in this project, several of the women returned their transcriptions with no changes except to the name I had given them as a pseudonym, and in every case they were for popular contemporary children’s names: two of the women chose the name “Sophia” for example. Isabella’s name was her own choice, and since—along with Sophia—it is also currently one of the most popular names for baby girls I found myself wondering if this was the name she and William had chosen for their fantasy daughter.

constitutes itself in corporeal perceptions. Someone has to miss something for it to be specifically absent.” Frers is writing here in the context of something that once existed in a material form—he notes (Frers 2013, p.434) that “an absence necessitates a relation to a lived place-time”—but he adds that “the feeling of dislocation and disruption [...] originates in the disruption of expectations”. It is in the expectation of their eventual subjectivity as a biological mother in relationship with a child that these women’s fantasies and sense of absence are based, and I suggest that it is the absence of that ‘relationship’ that is here (almost) constituted in “corporeal perceptions”.

The apparent inexplicability of these women’s assertions of their fantasy children’s ‘*isness*’ becomes more explicable if viewed through the frame of the concept of the transitional space; the “intermediate area of experiencing, to which inner reality and external life both contribute” (Winnicott 1971, p.2) and which Winnicott (1971, p.13) theorized to be in “direct continuity” with the play of small children. He wrote that from the time of their birth individuals are concerned with “the problem of the relationship between what is objectively perceived and what is subjectively conceived of” (Winnicott 1971, p.11). These fantasies might be understood to exist in a conceptual ‘space’ where what is usually understood as objective reality and as subjective fantasy overlap; where Elena, Deborah, Connie and Isabella’s experience of their fantasies of maternity and a child might be “neither a matter of inner psychic reality nor a matter of external reality” (Winnicott 1971, p.96) but something of both.

Drawing a fantasy

I suggest that one of the struggles many of the women in this study had in talking about their fantasy child(ren) stems from the difficulty in articulating in language this experience of a fantasy relationship that nevertheless has a feeling of reality for them. I was interested to see whether it might be possible for them to do so differently through the alternative possibilities that images—and subsequent talk about these images—offered. Drawing represents a different modality than words and talk for expression, and may have the capacity to capture different aspects of this experience. Two participants’ drawings stand out in this respect.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ I am not implying here that drawing exists outside of discourse, but rather that it represents a different modality than words and talk for expression, and may have the capacity to capture different aspects of this experience.

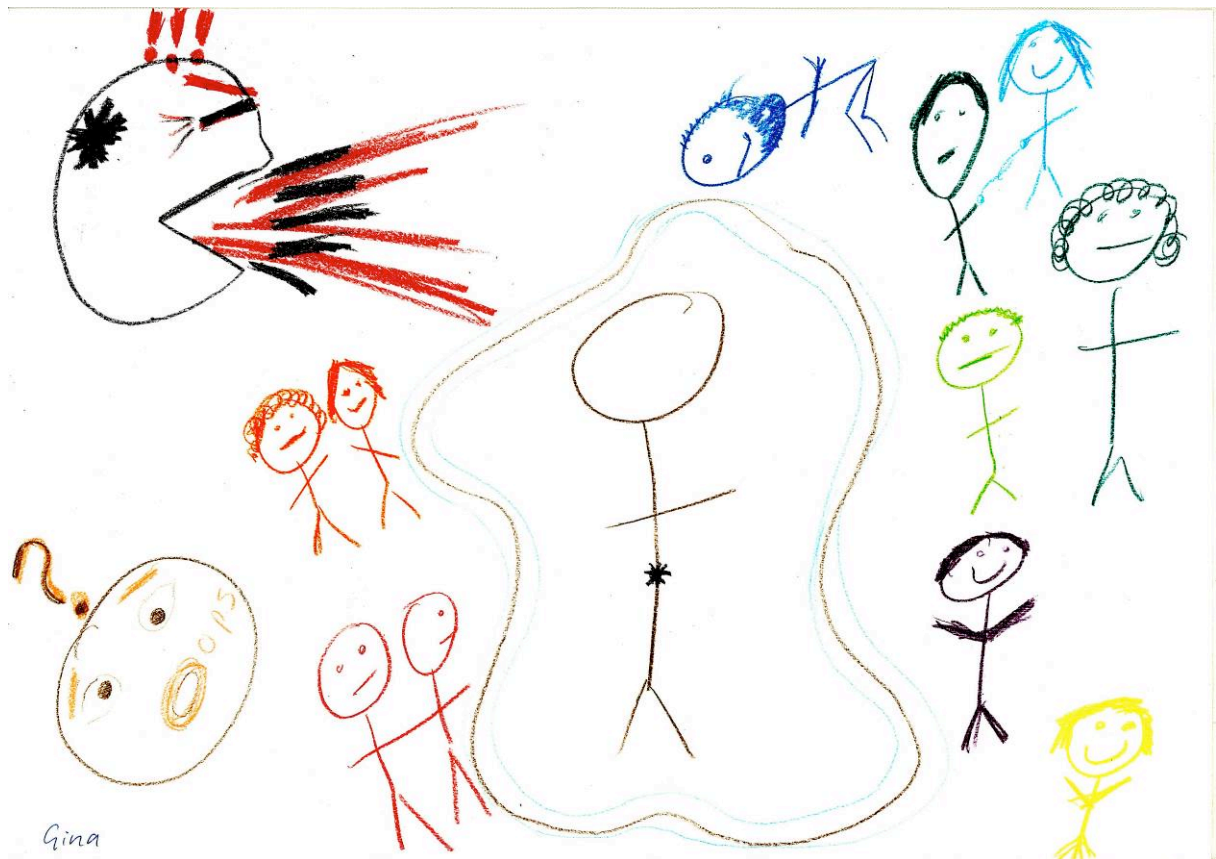


Figure 2: Gina's Drawing

Gina began the description of her drawing in its bottom left corner, saying that her most recent experience of circumstantial childlessness was one of a “kind of surprise [...] You sort of go along thinking that you don't know how things are going to end up, and so then, if one day you realise that, actually, this is how things end up [pause] that's quite shocking”.

Moving clockwise up the page, the red and black figure described “moments when I've been very angry because I felt [pause] because I felt that my partner was being selfish. And I didn't have, I didn't believe I had the ability to change any of the conditions in my life [pause] um [pause] yes, so then you're left with that”. She introduced the rest of the drawing in this way:

And then my overwhelming feeling is [pause] being kind of, this is me being kind of existentially alone and also [pause] alone in the sense of not having a real strong biological connection with another being because [...] I was adopted, and I have step children and all this kind of thing. So I've showed all my [pause] family, and I, I we treat each other as family and I love them all dearly and I've got grandchildren and [...] this is my husband and [pause] and we love each other [...] but there's still this sense of [pause] separation. I mean it's related to existential separation that I think everyone feels so it's related to this feeling of not having a [pause] offspring who can never disconnect from me no matter what I do [laughs]. And that feeling is right here [taps page at the black asterisk] right here where the offspring would be. It's not huge, it's just little.

Lynn (see drawing on p.78) began at the top right of her drawing with the two figures of her and her husband “we're sort of walking, we're walking into the future really”. The rainbow was “kind of representative, that this is [pause] I'm in a good space and I'm feeling kind of

hopeful about [pause] quite hopeful about my life and I'm kind of looking forward". The small red figures scattered around the perimeter of the drawing represented Lynn at "different stages of my life or different roles that I've had". In Chapter 3 I noted that Lynn concluded the description of her drawing by saying:

(A)nd then I sort of put some big breasts over the whole thing because what I always have in [pause] because I, if I really try to feel [pause] feel not having a child I think I get left with, I do have quite deep feelings of, of having missed the opportunity to nurture and I still [pause], I still would like that experience of a baby suckling on my nipple [...].

These drawings are similar in that they are both composed with a series of small figures showing aspects of the participant's 'real' life and relationships, arranged around a central point that symbolizes their fantasy child/maternity. Gina's fantasy was "not huge; it's just little" and Lynn's floated almost diaphanously "over the whole thing" but both dominated the image through their central positioning. Gina's small dense black asterisk created a focal point for the image, surrounded as it was by relatively uncluttered space, and Lynn's large red breasts were a motif, striking in its contrasting scale, that overlaid the narrative of her drawing. Each in its way captured an important aspect of these two women's maternal fantasies that was not achievable in spoken language; the way in which these fantasies both dominated other aspects of their lives, at the same time as being subordinate to them, through being able to be read simultaneously as both background and foreground. That their drawings were able to do this is as an outcome of the ways in which drawing can represent time, space, and objects' relativity to one another differently than language (Kress 2001).

4.3 Fantasies of motherhood

The maternal fantasies of the women in this study originated in their unique experience in relationship with others, particularly their mother, and in the often contradictory discourses and narratives of mothering in which their lives were embedded socially. As a consequence of this, their fantasies of maternity each represented a personal version of common themes and tropes of motherhood. Although these fantasies were idiosyncratic, they were almost always variations of their becoming a particular kind of woman living a particular kind of life. Many spoke of a 'mother' as being a selfless, nurturing woman who had a strong sense of belonging, who loved and was loved unconditionally, and who had a relationship of enduring and indestructible love with her child(ren). Becoming a mother was perceived to be a unique route to achieving these aspects of relationship and personal qualities in their own life, and their fantasies of maternity reflected this.

Motherhood as transformation

The theme of motherhood as a nexus of transformation was reflected in participants' fantasies of motherhood right across the research material in this study. Samantha spoke of it in this way:

There's got to be something about it [motherhood] that [pause] something that I can't [pause] fathom, and won't, wouldn't, won't be able to fathom. (...) I think it is a unique relationship.

Lois: In what way?

Samantha: [very quietly] In a look in the eyes. In the [pause] almost one year old 'where is she? Oh, there she is!' [in a whisper] and vice versa. Instant recognition. (...) I think that I'd like to be part of that, in a sense of [pause] growing up, becoming a different [pause] you know another [pause] different type of person, almost a stage of life. Which is not to say that I see it as a sort of [pause] a life, a set part of a life course, which would, that without it would mean a lesser life course or anything like that, but [pause] another dimension of who one is as an individual, just as all sorts of other new experiences bring out another dimension of an individual, but this, that sort of experience would be [pause] I think fundamentally different.

In this extract Samantha touches on both the idea of the mother/child relationship being "unique", which I discuss further below, and of motherhood creating the potential for a woman to become "another different type of person". Lisa Baraitser has theorized maternal subjectivity as "a fundamentally changed state" for a woman, involving "substantial shifts" that prompt "a renewed configuration of self" (2006, p. 221). There is a sense in Samantha's words that the fantasy she held of herself as a maternal subject in a relationship with a child is something that she both knew and at the same time did not know; something reached for in speech but never quite able to be articulated. It may be that she drew at some—probably unconscious—level on her embodied experience, as a child, of the kind of connectedness that she speaks of between a mother and her child, but she had not experienced for herself from the other side, as a woman/mother. Perhaps because of this experience she had an awareness or intimation of the shift Baraitser speaks of, but she was only able to articulate her understanding of its potential in her own life in oblique ways.

Women may fear a "renewed configuration of self" for the uncertainty and potential loss it entails (Baraitser 2006), but this research material suggests that many of these participants also appeared to be drawn to what they perceived to be its potential gains; among which was the opportunity they understood it to present in terms of "growing up"—as Samantha put it—or of developing "another dimension" of themselves. In doing so they might be seen to be drawing on a discourse of motherhood as a necessary part of growing into mature womanhood, but on several occasions participants explicitly denied this idea. In Chapter 6 (p.

177), for example, I note how roundly Lynn rejected her sister's suggestion that she was not a "proper woman" unless she had had children. Samantha was quick to clarify that she did not understand a life without children to be "a lesser life", and in this clarification made it obvious that she was aware of feminist critiques of the idea of a woman's life being lacking in some important ways if she does not have a child. Samantha's pauses may indicate a tension in her attempts to find a way to talk about what she understood to be a fundamentally different change that motherhood would potentially create in her, while at the same time not diminishing the status of women who do not have children.

Belonging in a unique and enduring relationship

Samantha's emphasis on the unique and transformative effect of motherhood, and her spare vignette of a carefully observed mother and child, described in a quiet intense voice, eloquently expressed her sense of aspects of this relationship being intangible and indescribable for her. It was telling that she shifted register markedly in answer to my question about why a mother/child relationship was unique. Apparently unable to 'explain' it in logical terms, she used words that for her evoked an embodied experience of the intimacy in the recognition of a shared pleasure in one another that might exist between a mother and her young child. This shift may indicate a time in the interview where, in matrixial terms, Samantha found the language available to her inadequate in its capacity to capture her sense of the particular quality of this relationship. For her, and for many of the women in this study, this relationship between a mother and her child was understood to be "unique" in this quality.

There is a further apparently contradictory quality to these maternal fantasies. Women's talk reflected a sense in which motherhood itself represents something that links them to the experience of Life, understood in elemental terms. They chose words that indicated a grand scale; of having a child being "living life to the full", of a child being both a "gift" from Life and a "contribution" to it, and "one of the main reasons why we're here" for example. Their visions of the mother/child relationship often had an idealized optimal, quintessential quality; they used words like "complete", enduring "no matter what", forged of love that is "unconditional" and so forth. When women spoke of their *personal* fantasies of being a mother however, these ideals found their expression in very ordinary, domestic moments: watching a child's performance in a school drama production or sports match; helping with homework; joining in a child's play; being able to join in the talk at the lunch table at work. Samantha's intimate vignette captured this well. It may be that these images are brought in to

do service for the ineffable quality of connectedness of the mother/child relationship, and these activities are idealized in the absence of a maternal practice.

An embodied child creates a woman as a ‘mother’ socially, and also makes possible the web of relationships that women spoke of as “my *own family*”; different from but related to their family of birth. It was this idea of family that made many women unwilling to have a child on their own; for many it seemed a family is larger than just a mother and her child (or a woman and her partner). Women’s fantasies of maternity were often expressed as being about creating this family that they *belonged* to and that belonged to them.

I’ve never felt a strong sense of family because my parents split up (...) there were no brothers and sisters, there were no um cousins, and aunties and uncles and that sort of stuff. (...) I think it’s the um, I don’t know, it’s that sort of creation of a being together, you know the um, I don’t know how to describe it really, that sort of yearning to have, to be a unit in a way. Yeah, just to have, I don’t know somehow I’ve (...) it’s sort of like, um the sense of completeness that you have as a family.

Irene struggled here to find words for her fantasy of belonging and being ‘complete’; it was a yearning that was particularly strong in women who described themselves, as she did, as not “having a strong sense of family”. When Gina, for example said, “I’ve spent my whole life trying to, trying to [pause] belong, to a family and it always felt like it was just half there (...) [Lois: “and so a child would have been...”] “A whole one. Yeah. A whole one, yeah”, her repetition emphasised the power this sense of wholeness held for her. For women who spoke of having previously experienced this sense of family in their own family of origin, the longing was to recreate it for another generation.

While Gina and Irene yearned to belong *to* a family of their own making, other women spoke of their yearning for a child who belonged *to them*. Many participants invoked the notion of ‘unconditional love’ in talking about this relationship between a mother and her child. Their fantasies of the mother/child relationship were not only unique in their quality, but also in their endurance; they were “far more steady than the other things we fill our life with”. Gina talked about “offspring who can never disconnect from me no matter what I do”, and “the simple fact of being someone’s mother, they can never erase that”. This quality of perceived durability—a fantasy of something that *persists*—was also evident in the ways many participants spoke of children being in some way a legacy; a loved husband who lived on in some way in his child, a person to teach about the values they held to be important, someone who will remember them after they die, someone to whom they would leave cherished belongings.

Psychoanalytic and popular literature, and indeed everyday experience of the relationships between mothers and their children, make it clear that such an idealized relationship of a persisting and ‘unconditional love’ is often a fiction: that all mothers struggle at times with ambivalent feelings towards their children, and that strained, painful or distant relationships between mothers and their children are not uncommon. Parker (2005, p.1) writes that maternal ambivalence is an experience “shared variously by all mothers in which loving and hating feelings for their children exist side by side”. Many of the participants in this study were self reflexive women who had access to feminist critiques of idealized mother/child relationships and found themselves in the contradictory position of both personally fantasizing an idealized relationship, and simultaneously being critical of these kinds of idealizations. The tension this created for many of these women was evident in their narratives, and they framed their responses to this tension in different ways. Lesley, for example, talked about the existence of difficult aspects of her relationship with her mother throughout her life as evidence of this quality of durability in the mother/child relationship rather than of its fragility. Commenting on the very painful relationship she had with her parents, especially her mother, she said,

I have wondered about the intense need to actually resolve my relationship with my parents and that I really come down to the fact that I can’t walk away from it; there is something more there, there is some much deeper bond there that I have to resolve, or I have to resolve the difficult bits of. That it is kind of a psychic bond which can be stretched but never really broken.

The ‘selfish woman’

One of the sites in which the fantasy of motherhood as transformation was most marked was in the contradictory potential for it to be both the source of and escape from the spectre of the ‘selfish’ woman. Tyler (2007, p.174) argues that the “hated and feared” figure of the ‘selfish feminist’ that developed in the 1970s was a “predominant caricature” of feminism; a “myth [that] was mobilized to undermine the social and political aims of the women’s movement”. Perhaps the idea of the selfish feminist was able to make a strong foothold in the popular imagination because of an underlying presumption that women are naturally unselfish because they are ‘natural’ mothers. Selfishness was certainly understood by many participants to be a quality that is an inevitable part of becoming older, and motherhood was often invoked as a way of changing one’s fate in this regard. Stone (2011, p.169) writes that “insofar as one gains value on becoming a mother this is because one comes to be regarded as a special sort of person who is selflessly devoted to others”. Becoming a parent (for the ‘right’ reasons) was often understood to be a route to becoming a better and less selfish person. Discussing what was lost if one did not become a mother, Julia, for example, said:

You lose the experience of loving in a particular way, being required to love in a particular way. I think you lose the opportunity to know yourself better, I think, as a person. I think from what I observe, parenting is a huge training ground (...) for being human.

It is to the particular aspect of “being required” that Julia here attributed the potential transformation of motherhood. Gina described it similarly as “that experience of really existing for another being. To cut through the selfishness that we all seem to inherit as part of our species”.

As all of these fantasies do, this aspect reflects both women’s experience as infants and children, their observation of others, and the social and cultural resources in which they are immersed. The idea of motherhood demanding something particular from women is one in common circulation. Baraitser (2006, p.8, first cited in Moyers & Tucher 1990, p.60), for example, quotes the writer Toni Morrison saying,

There was something so valuable about what happened when one became a mother. For me it was the most liberating thing that ever happened (...) Liberating because the demands that children make are not the demands of a normal ‘other’. The children’s demands on me were things that nobody else ever asked me to do.

Many participants appeared to be wary however of the potential to have a child for the “wrong reasons”. Kim captured the concern of many participants who spoke of the selfishness of women in choosing to have a child to fulfil their own needs and desires:

I think the thing that I feel strongly about is [pause] you’re not having a child for you, you’re having a child [pause] so that that child [pause] has a [pause] good life. You know it’s not [pause] I mean I [pause] I feel quite strongly about that, that’s it’s not really [pause] you know, so that I’ve ticked that box in my own personal accomplishments.

Similarly, many participants had considered having a child on their own when they were unsuccessful in ‘finding’ a partner, but rejected it because of perceived selfishness inherent in a single parent choosing to sacrifice the rights of a child (to a father) or a man (to his child) in order to satisfy their own desire for a child. Paradoxically then, the notion of the ‘selfish mother’ who prioritises her own desires to have a child runs alongside one of the selfish woman who *also* chooses to prioritise her own desires; by *not* having a child.

Being ‘maternal’

In describing the qualities of someone taking up a maternal identity the words “maternal”, “caring”, “mothering” and “nurturing” were often used interchangeably to refer to the idea of “taking care” of people and helping them to “be fulfilled”.⁸¹ A desire to nurture can be

⁸¹ I discuss the idea of ‘nurturing’ and being ‘maternal’ more fully in Chapter 6.

interpreted in different ways. In contrast—or maybe resistance—to a commonly held discourse of motherhood as sacrifice, a “self-abnegating masochistic femininity” (Baraitser 2006, pp. 223-224), there was a strong sense in many of these narratives of being maternal being about taking *pleasure* in taking care of people. De Marneffe (2004, p.8) argues for the recognition of the “intrinsically valuable” experience of mothering. She writes:

(A mother’s) love for her child makes her *want* to put herself aside, and the way that putting herself aside to care for her child *paradoxically fulfills her* (...) (H)aving a child changes a woman’s relation to herself and others in a way that has implications for how we think about the self.

De Marneffe (2006a p.241, italics in original)

De Marneffe’s words link back to the ways in which Gina and Julia, among others, talked about motherhood having the capacity to free them from what they understood to be an inherent selfishness. Rather than being understood to be driven by a lack, these women’s fantasies of nurturing maternity might be understood to be a means of materializing a “primary affective compassion”, or love (Ettinger 2010, p.1).

Being ‘maternal’ was not only understood as an adjective however, but also used as shorthand for being a particular *kind* of woman that was understood to be socially desirable. Many of the participants identified themselves as “maternal” and were very anxious to distance themselves from an assumption that they had made a choice not to have a child. The importance and intensity of this distancing was revealed in a comment from Shelley in a discussion about being asked whether or not she had children:

I really struggle with people who make the assumption that you’ve chosen not to have children.(...) I didn’t choose not to be a mother. I love, you know, I would have loved to have been a mother. I’m not some nasty cold-hearted bitch who’s set her whole life on her career.

Shelley drew here on the figure of the selfish and childless career woman—the ‘selfish feminist’—and actively resisted the potential for others to frame her in this way. She set “I love” and “I would have loved” against the figure of “some nasty cold-hearted bitch” and vehemently distanced herself from it. The intensity of her words suggests that the associations she had with the identity of childless woman may have made it one that she felt strongly defended against. Like Deborah, Shelley appeared to construct herself as *already* maternal, though not a mother. Her words suggest that for her, having a child may have represented an opportunity to embody qualities such as nurturing and selflessness that are popularly associated with mothering, and that she valued highly in herself.

4.4 Igniting the fantasy

Almost all of the women I interviewed told me that becoming a mother was something they grew up presuming would be part of their future, but for a range of reasons, it had not happened; there were other more pressing things to do first, and there seemed to be plenty of time. I have suggested however, that throughout their life the fantasy dimension of their potential maternal subjectivity was in constant development. It seems that as well as being composed of unconscious material that was inaccessible to them, much of this fantasy material was dormant; outside of their conscious awareness for most of the time, although it became apparent occasionally. Kelly, for example, said that throughout her 20s “when I saw friends with theirs [children] I always got a bit of a pang thinking, you know I’d love that one day and all those sorts of things. But it was always ‘one day, one day’”.

There was a distinct point in most participants’ narrative where this changed; where the ‘sense of themselves as a mother’ was triggered, and for many of these participants, this was an unexpected pregnancy, which was terminated or miscarried. Over and over again women told me that a longing to have a baby became different and much more dominant in their lives after this experience. Although these women did not experience their baby as somehow separate—through sensations such as its movements within their womb for example—it seems their brief pregnancy may have provided them with an embodied awareness of the existence of a life, that was not their own and yet was somehow part of them, that is unique to pregnancy. This can be understood to come about through changes of their experience of their body such as enhanced sensations of taste or smell, tiredness, nausea and so forth. From a matrixial perspective this brief pregnancy might be interpreted as re-animating the shared borderspace stratum that they shared with their own mother (Pollock 2006). These women spoke of themselves being changed by the experience in terms of their sense of themselves as a mother, and their perception of this was often that the pregnancy had created this change.

I suggest that one way in which this might be interpreted is that the embodied experience of pregnancy triggered their dormant maternal fantasies, bringing more of them into conscious awareness. It may be that it is not so much that a pregnancy *creates* a fantasy of having a child, but rather that for some women it may have a particular power to ignite the fantasy of maternity that has been largely unconscious. In Ettinger’s terms it might be understood to be an experience that “brings the trans-subjective stream closer to the surface” (Hollway 2012b, p. 550). For women who have not experienced a pregnancy, it may rather have been a

growing awareness that their fertility was limited, coupled with a marked change in their life circumstances, that triggered this change.

4.5 Maree

Our current cultural climate, and perhaps feminism itself, stressing the incompatibility of career and motherhood, provide a cover for internal conflicts and fears, enabling women to mask conflicts and ambivalence about motherhood by turning them into conflicts between motherhood and career.

(Chodorow 2003, p. 1187)

Before turning to a general discussion of the key themes of this chapter I want to illustrate them in a more detailed study of the research material associated with Maree, a 33 year old *pakeha* woman who said that as a child and teenager growing up she “assumed” she would have children.⁸² She described herself as a “tomboy” teenager who was more interested in the work she wanted to do “working with people, helping people somehow”. In her 20s, while she “wondered” whether she did want to have children because she did not feel “particularly clucky”, she says she felt “quite sad about not having children at all” and considered adoption or “being a foster mum”. In her late twenties she became engaged (“to the wrong person”) because she felt “a strong sense of pressure from society” to get married and have children. The engagement broke up and she decided to take a year travelling overseas. During this time she became “accidentally” pregnant, and “rushed” home to New Zealand to have a termination. At the time of her interview she had recently finished counselling training.

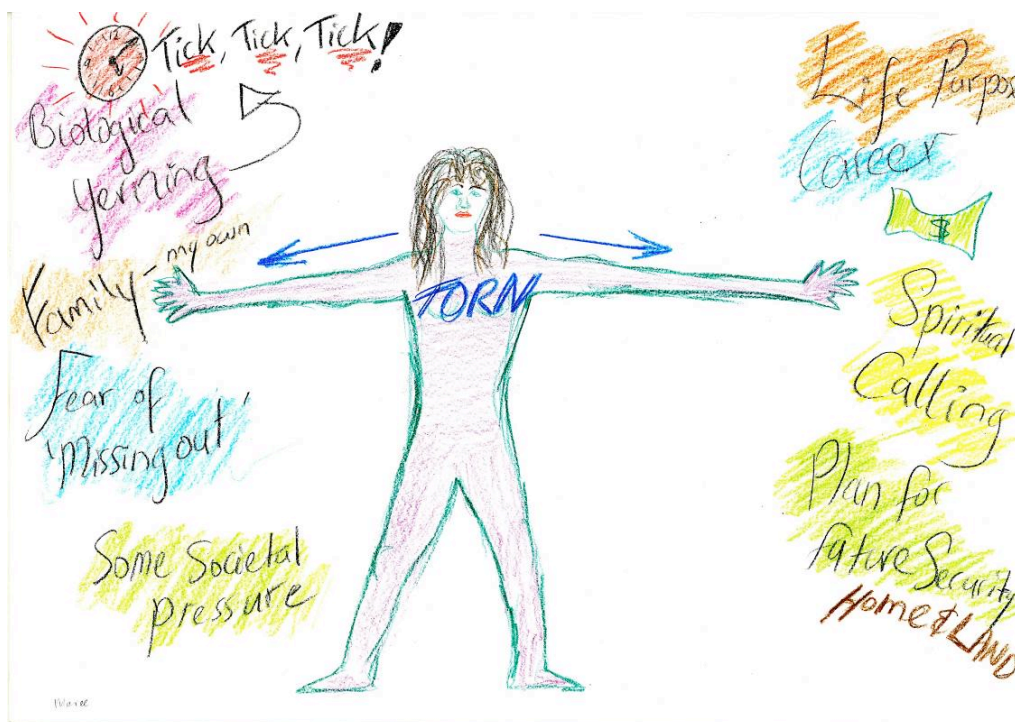


Figure 3: Maree's Drawing

⁸² *Pakeha* is a Maori word in common usage in New Zealand to describe someone of European descent.

“Feeling torn”

In making a drawing participants often find themselves able to create a succinct representation of the key elements of their experience (Kearney & Hyle 2004), although it is necessarily one that is situated in time and space. Maree was one of the women who attended a group interview and made a drawing that she discussed with the other women in the group. She summed up her drawing for a group of other women who share a similar experience in two words: “feeling torn”. Her strong drawing of a naked female figure taking up the whole of the central space of the page was a self portrait rather than a generic ‘stick figure’, particularly recognisable in the detail of her hair, since Maree’s thick, dark, wavy hair is a striking feature of her appearance. Given the important part that embodiment plays in the analysis that follows, it is intriguing that she represented herself as a whole fully shaped female body, rather than as a blob, a face, or a stick figure, as other participants did. The ‘biological clock’ is set at 4.10 or 5.10; if this is read as a metaphor for her fertility-time passing (and assuming it is day rather than night) it is not yet dark evening, but it is getting late in the day.

She described her drawing in this way:

Um, mine is about feeling torn. Um [pause] on one side I’ve got biological kinds of things happening with my body, like, just, umm, all of a sudden being really aware of seeing babies around and pregnant women and, “ooh, what’s it about?” and [pause] just, really feeling the tick tock of the clock.[...] Ummm. Wanting my own family, umm [pause] wanting the opportunity to be a mum [pause] umm [pause] fear of missing out [pause] and [pause] some societal pressure, but not huge amounts, but it’s definitely present. [...]Ummm [pause] and the other side is [pause] my career, my life purpose, it’s a spiritual thing too because it’s something that, um, I felt called to do [pause] umm [pause] for a long time. So [pause] I’ve been working towards it for ages. Um, I’ve just finished my training as a counsellor, so that’s what I feel I’m here to do. Umm [pause] and also planning for future security. And whether or not I, you know, find a life partner, I have no idea so, I need to plan for my own future security, and I want my own home and land, so [pause] just feeling really torn and at this stage this arm’s slightly longer, because that’s the things that are happening. So [pause] umm [pause] I don’t know, feeling a bit stretched.

Maree appeared to conceptualize the options and choices available to her as a binary where motherhood and family was assumed to be in opposition to career and “life purpose”. This binary is exemplified in her drawing, where motherhood—highlighted with a blood red overlay—is seen as being a yearning with “biological” origins, and is set against the weight of her “spiritual calling”, her “life purpose”, and powerful issues of career, money and future security. There is a hint in her description of her drawing of the way such a binary has long been weighted in the Western tradition, where the demands and desires of the body have been judged inferior to the higher moral claim of a spiritual call.

“This arm’s slightly longer”

At a point of making choices about a potential maternal subjectivity why is it that one side of Maree’s choices was defined as winning out over the other “at this stage”? One obvious interpretation is in her words “because that’s the things that are happening now”; in other words, there was a temporal aspect to this experience, but it was fluid and, given her age, she understood there to be still choices available to her.

A second interpretation of Maree’s drawing is contextual. Salecl (2010) claims that choices are anxiety producing because the individual is concerned with the way others will judge his or her choices. In the group interview—the setting for the drawing and its explanation—Maree appeared to be concerned with representing herself and her choices to others in the group in the most favourable light.⁸³ I suggest that revealing her “politics of lifestyle” (Giddens A., cited in Cassell, 1993, p.337) to a group of women unknown to her who may judge her and find her wanting in some way was potentially anxiety provoking for her. Given this concern, the way she presented her binary, with her arm stretching further to the ‘career’ option, suggests that she may have understood motherhood as a less socially acceptable goal than one of developing herself and her career, pursuing her ‘life purpose’ and establishing financial stability and security. De Marneffe (2004, p.3) argues that many women’s longing to nurture their children has become “increasingly problematic”. She writes:

In the current milieu, women rarely perceive their desire to care for their children as intellectually respectable, and that makes it less emotionally intelligible as well. On a broader social level, mothers’ need and desire to work and its importance to their self-sufficiency and self-expression get a strong public hearing, but mothers’ needs and desires with respect to nurturing their children receive comparatively little serious discussion.

(De Marneffe 2004, p.13)

The ubiquity and popularity of narratives of self development and self-expression, making life goals and so forth are socially validated and valorized concepts that are readily recognisable and therefore easy to articulate. Perhaps they offered Maree little concern that the other women in the group might question them. I suggest that something of this shadow of the dubious desirability of motherhood spilled over into Maree’s attitude towards it, both in her reckoning of how others might judge her, and also in her own internal conversations about the choices she made. Giddens (2006, p.3) writes that asking “Who am I, what shall I do, and

⁸³ An example of her concern occurred in the individual interview, which preceded the group one, in which Maree expressed concern about how her termination might “go down” with the group, and said she would be “very private” about it in that context. Other participants who had had terminations had the same concern, and though a number talked about them playing an important part in their life story in the individual interview, none discussed them in the group interviews.

who shall I be?” is potentially liberating, but also fraught with anxiety. In contrast to her apparent ease and comfort in talking about her career and life goals, Maree appeared to find it harder to express the nuances of her maternal desires and her responses to them.

It may also be that her ‘career’ arm was longer because her fantasies about being a mother were, as de Marneffe (2004) puts it, “less emotionally intelligible”; a yearning that she had not been able to make meaning of and symbolise in language. Maree’s comments in the individual interview suggested that she felt she had not been able to make sense of some important aspects of her longing to be a mother because she had not had adequate opportunities to explore them.

The tension of opposing pulls in Maree’s drawing powerfully illustrated the complexities and pressures of the competing and contradictory discourses of motherhood that she faced as a young woman making reproductive choices. In all the group interviews I was struck by the way that women who were very expressive about their yearning to have a child in an individual interview were much more guarded in the way they talked about it in the group, even though they knew these to be women who were in a similar situation. It was as if there was something about a desire to be a mother that was perceived to be only acceptable socially if one is also primarily ‘successful’ in terms of career, education and material achievements. It was only as interaction in the groups progressed and some trust was established within them that individuals began to acknowledge their desire to have a child and their feelings about not having done so. Perhaps participants spent the early part of the group time making a judgment about whether or not the group’s dynamics replicated or were different from their interactions with others in the ‘outside’ world, where they experienced there to be no place for, or recognition of, the different reality of their maternal fantasies.

“That maternal thing”

It was in the context of these conflicts that Maree introduced the particular ‘fateful moment’ (Giddens 1991, p.113) when she was 31 that she perceived to have changed her orientation to motherhood, and that I suggest ‘ignited’ her maternal fantasies.

I thought I’m just going to put it [the decision about whether or not to have children] to one side and if and when I meet the right person, um, then I’ll decide on that point.[pause] Um, so I finished my degree and then I decided to take a year off and go travelling, and [pause] quite a big thing happened while I was overseas. Um, I met someone and accidentally got pregnant, and decided that it was all completely wrong and couldn’t happen. And so I rushed home and had a termination and I’ve always felt that that was the right thing to do, um [pause] but it did something to me. Um, it was quite, it, it, it kind of, that maternal thing that wasn’t there before came and, um, it’s quite, it’s quite interesting because even though I feel like it’s the right, I’d made the right decision, um, the, the person wasn’t someone I could imagine being with and raising a child with and, and they

were on the other side of the world and, um, it all felt completely wrong, um, and I just, I knew really, really quickly what I needed to do and I knew that I had to do it. So, [pause] um, yeah but as I said, after that sort of something changed and I don't know whether it's [pause] like a human instinct thing or something biochemical hormonal change just from being pregnant for a short time, I'm not sure what happened but, [pause] um.

In her interview up to the point at which she discussed this moment, Maree had spoken in a smooth but flat tone—almost as if she were ‘reporting’ on her life—but her account of this segment of her life story was marked by a clear change in her tone and fluidity of expression. In the first two sentences she set up the background to the story she was about to tell, then at the pause before “quite a big thing happened” this speech change occurred. During the narration of the story she broke her sentences into short segments which seemed carefully chosen and articulated, she repeated words and phrases quite often, and she ended the segment with the sharp inward gasp that she used at other points in her interview which seemed particularly emotionally laden. The change in her delivery throughout this component of the interview suggests that this segment of her story was difficult for her to tell, and important for her to tell ‘truthfully’; her difficulty may have been related to telling a possibly shameful story to me, to her feelings related to the story, her remaining confusion about its impact on her, or to other reasons which are unavailable to me. Her care in telling it, and her immediate recall later in the interview of the exact date at which the events took place—although it was two years past—suggest that the content of it continued to carry weight for her.

The segment carries a strong theme of Maree's sense of moral agency in her understanding of her ability to make decisions and the necessity of acting on them. In telling the story to me it seemed to be important to her to stress that choosing the right father for her child, and his being an active presence in the child's life, was an essential factor in being an ethical parent for her. There seemed to be a link to her own experience in this; in another part of the interview Maree said she believed it would be “not fair” to raise a child as a single parent because her own father was “not actively” around for her as a child. It is interesting that Maree, as a high functioning successful professional person with a wide range of skills and capacities, used her own experience to say that she had a special responsibility to provide an active father for a child she might have, rather than using her experience to say that a child can grow up successfully, without the active input of a father.

Maree understood her ambivalence about having a child to have changed when she became pregnant; “that maternal thing came”, something that “wasn't there before”. She seemed to understand the “maternal thing” and its coming as something that “happened” both *in* her and

to her; something that stood outside of her ability to control it. Maree struggled to find words to articulate and make sense of this change in her, but it is clear that its impact was considerable. In the absence of any other explanation she fell back on the idea of an instinctual response but she did not appear to be entirely convinced about this. In speculating that the genesis of her longing to become a mother was possibly biologically based, Maree implied a force that is somehow outside of her control; simultaneously her and not-her.

Writing sociologically about the quality of being ‘haunted’ in an individual’s life, Gordon (1996, p.8) says, “(b)eing haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as transformative recognition”. When this change arose for Maree, she ‘recognised’ it, and she named it: *“that maternal thing”*. She understood ‘it’ to be something that she ‘knew’ in some way and she symbolised it as “maternal”. In Gordon’s conceptualization of “being haunted” Maree’s experience of pregnancy and termination is one whereby she was drawn—“a bit magically”—into a “transformative recognition” of the reality of “that maternal thing” which haunted her. I suggest that that reality might be understood to be her fantasy of maternity; her “sense of myself as a mother”. The metaphor of haunting is useful in its emphasis on the powerful yet unseen quality of this fantasy.

“Being nurturing”: selfless maternity as “a really important part of being human”

This component of the interview also suggests something of the content of Maree’s maternal fantasies. She elaborated “that maternal thing” in this way:

Maree: Yeah it’s a desire to be a mother, it’s not so much, I’m not necessarily clucky with babies or, um, but the whole mother thing, um...

Lois: What is it about being a mother that, that appeals to you, do you think? What do you think about when you think about yourself being a mother?

Maree: Nurturing, um.[pause] Yeah that’s an interesting question. Just being really nurturing and, um, [pause] I just, I think it’s almost part of the human experience and I guess if I don’t get to experience it, [pause] I’d feel like I’ve missed out on a really important part of being human.

As several other participants did, Maree endowed a maternal subjectivity with a quality that is a highly valuable part of being “human”—“almost” an essential one— that she can only achieve by becoming a mother. Gina expressed a similar idea when she said:

It’s like, I guess similar to the sense that if you were born wealthy, and you never wondered how you were going to pay the rent. Ever. Then you don’t have the same credibility with your fellow

people, and in fact you have missed out on something very basic, so you're going to go through life not having experienced that.

For both women the nature of "that maternal thing" was slippery and they struggled to articulate what it was, but it had the weight of something that gives one "credibility" as a human being; something that is "basic"; fundamental in a way that sets it apart from other potential subjectivities. For Maree, "the whole mother thing" was much bigger than having a baby, and although she found the word "nurturing" it seemed not quite enough; the experience was one that eluded symbolization for her, though it was in some way familiar to her and she was aware that for her it was "really important".

Maree's maternal fantasy in this segment hinged on the relational practices of selflessly nurturing a child. Without that in her life, she said, there is "a void; that maternal, like I'm not, there's, there's no, um, what's that word, object is the wrong word, but there's nothing that I can give my maternal nurturing-ness to". To speak of a child fulfilling her longing in this way appeared to create a tension for her. Clearly nurturing is a process that involves an 'other' to nurture, but she was anxious that I did not interpret her desire to be a mother as simply one of filling a void in her life. Her reluctance to refer to a potential child as an "object" was that to do so would imply that she might be needing a child to meet her own needs to "nurture", and that would be incommensurate with her maternal fantasy of herself as a selfless mother. She went on to elaborate:

It's, [pause] it's, it's hard, I don't think *my* maternal instinct is a selfish one, I know that's a strange thing to say, but it's not.[pause] I don't want to have a child for *me* it's like, um, I want to nurture someone, especially knowing what I know about human behaviour [...] I see all the horrible, well, challenges that people can face if they're raised in, you know, um, [gasping breath in] challenging environments [...] I'd like to have the opportunity to, um, nurture, you know, try and give someone all that they need.

Maree was keen to distance herself from those whose maternity was "selfish" (that is, based on meeting the emotional needs of the mother); she was quick to clarify that *her* "maternal instinct" was to provide a child with what she saw as the ideal circumstances for development. It seemed she was only able to acknowledge her longing to have a child by transforming it into an unselfish desire to nurture another human being. In this way she also revealed the details of her fantasy of maternity: a mother who expresses an important part of what it is to be human by providing selflessly for the needs of her child. For Maree, 'mother'

is a verb; it is about *doing* mothering in a particular relationship, and its *legitimate* motivation is to meet the child's needs, rather than her own.^{84 85}

Embodying a fantasy

When she returned to New Zealand while pregnant, Maree was put on a waiting list for the termination procedure but had to wait for some weeks before it happened. She described that time in this way:

I, I was actually nine and a half weeks and all sorts of things were happening to my body and, um, [pause] so I had the opportunity to, to, because I can't just pretend things don't [pause] I'm not one of these people who can, um, do something else and pretend something's not happening. So I was processing the whole thing during the whole experience and, and, um, kind of connecting to this little embryo [small laugh] and, and apologising that I can't, you know, I just can't, you know, do, do this and I believe in, in souls and things and um [pause]. And so I did all that and, um, explained [small laugh], you know, just, I, you know, for whatever the embryo was I did love it and care for it and it was the best thing for it not to come this time round. [Big breath in]

This section of Maree's account tells a lot about both how finely detailed a woman's relationship to her fantasy potential maternal subjectivity and child may be, and also about concerns around the ways in which such fantasies might be perceived socially. Maree began it by positioning herself as one who has a certain personal honesty and courage in confronting what is happening in her life. Her words imply that to do so was not the easy way out that others might have taken. She often positioned herself as other to those who may want to mother for 'selfish' reasons, and those who do not 'process' or pay emotional attention to the decision not to terminate a pregnancy. In doing this she drew on discourses that in some ways evaluate people in terms of their emotional maturity and sensitivity. It was important to her that she situate herself in relation to me as a person who acknowledged the presence of the "little embryo" and explained her regrets and reasons to it in as loving and honest a way as she could. At the same time though, in her small laughs, Maree attempted to minimize her actions, showing her concern that I might be judging the actions she took in "connecting to this little embryo" as perhaps slightly silly. Her repetitions of "you know" can be read as a plea for empathy with the necessity of her choices.

As I have discussed more generally earlier, I suggest that Maree's experience of her brief pregnancy and the termination of it was, in Ettinger's terms, an experience that was transformative in bringing what she understands as "that maternal thing" into her conscious

⁸⁴ I explore the concept of 'nurturing' as it relates to the maternal more fully in Chapter 6.

⁸⁵ Maree's emphasis on the importance of *doing* mothering resonates with a sociological insight first advanced by Morgan (2011, 1996) and later Finch (2007) in terms of their discussion of the significance of family practices, in which they argue that in order to understand families attention must be paid to what people in families *do* as well as how they are positioned.

awareness because it offered her a brief *embodied* experience of her fantasy maternity and child. It seems that the physicality of pregnancy, and the physical materiality of items such as baby clothes (which Maree twice commented that she “loved” to buy for friends with babies) somehow came to symbolize this “maternal thing” for her.

The segment is also an example of the oblique way a woman’s maternal fantasies are revealed in their talk. Maree took up a subject position of ‘nurturing mother’ through “loving” and “caring for” “the embryo” in ways that she immediately knew how to assume because they already existed in her fantasy of being a mother. In turn for her “the embryo” readily took up the place of the child of her fantasy in her interactions with it. In this sense, in fantasy she was *already* a mother, in the same way as Deborah was. In hearing her account I sensed the kind of mother Maree might want to be to a living child and, because she knew me to be a mother, I think this was her intention; that is, in acting as she did she was performing the mothering of her fantasies, and in describing her actions in relation to the embryo she was eliciting my recognition of her, as a particular *kind* of mother.

“Something I really, really want”

There is a sense of an opaque and conflicted quality to this awareness of her fantasy for Maree however; in some ways it remained a mystery to her, something that she was unclear about and a little reluctant to claim. When I asked about the times in which she is aware of what she described as the “void” occupied by “that maternal thing” in her life, for example, this opaque quality of her yearning for “my own family” was revealed in her responses to a cousin’s experience:

Um, I’ve noticed a big reaction, um I’ve got a cousin who’s like a brother, um, he’s up in [northern city], he’s like a younger brother. And he recently, like in the last two years he met, um, this awesome girl and they fell *completely* head over heels in love, got married really quickly and had a baby really quickly [breath in], and, and they just, you know, they’re perfect, you know, it’s just *so* lovely. Like I’m so happy for them and, um, just thinking about their situation makes me smile, you know, because I’m down here in [southern city]. When I’m physically around them it’s, again it’s beautiful to watch and it, and it’s awesome but I, it’s like I just, I fall really *flat* after that and for about three days, and I’m thinking, “What’s going on here?” The first time I was thinking, “What the heck’s going on here,” and then I sort of recognised that it’s obviously something I really, *really* want [small laugh]. Um, and this next time round I knew straightaway and it took me a few days to sort of pick myself back up again. So it’s, while I’m really, really happy for them I feel quite sad and like I’m missing out on all that and, ‘cause it’s right in front of me and they’re so happy.

The marked contrast in Maree’s tone and style of delivery between this segment of her account and much of the rest of her interview tells me that it is a part of her story that carries a particular energy for her, as the earlier segment about her pregnancy and termination in which

she also became much more animated also did. She had described herself as the “tomboy” of her family of origin, and I wonder if in this role she identified with her male cousin who was “like a younger brother”. Perhaps there is something about the embodied nature of someone (who is ‘nearly’ her) taking up this subjectivity that she so desired which made it more difficult for her. Intersubjectively speaking, perhaps the boundaries between ‘me’ and ‘not-me’ between close siblings (or quasi-siblings in this case) and others with whom people feel a close connection are more porous than they are between those who are more distant, and that it is less possible to dismiss that longed-for life as something ‘other’ people have, rather than something one might almost have had, and may still have. As a further example, Maree also commented elsewhere that she felt “guarded” around her sister’s family of four children, finding it “rough” because “they’re all nested in and they’re this really awesome solid family [...] and it’s something that I’d love too”. It seems that when she was at a distance and she could keep the vision of her sister, or her cousin and his “perfect” little family as an *idea*, she could take pleasure in their happiness, but faced with it embodied—“right in front of her”—she was less able to ignore the gap between it (and the fulfillment of her maternal fantasies that it represented for her) and the present reality of her life.

I relate Maree’s slight hesitance in recounting this experience to my earlier discussion about the shadow cast by the dubious desirability of motherhood. Her small laugh when she told me “it’s something I really *really* want” suggests that she wanted to minimize this statement; she seemed a little embarrassed to be admitting it, suggesting that it is in some way at odds with the image she wanted to project and believe of herself or that she understood to be socially acceptable.

Overall her enthusiasm in telling this story about her response to her cousin’s coupled happiness and the conception of his child, the language she chose, and the repetitions and hesitations in her speech are in marked contrast with the measured and deliberate way she talked about her life elsewhere in the interview. Hearing it, I found it hard to reconcile these two very different ‘versions’ of Maree: the serious, responsible young woman with a slightly ‘flat’ delivery who was committed to establishing an independent life for herself in the world, and the bubbling young woman so obviously attracted to a “perfect”, romantic story of a couple falling “completely head over heels in love”. Once again, Maree’s sharp breath in after “had a baby really quickly” may indicate words that were emotionally laden for her. I suggest that, along with her minimising little laughs, it suggests a yearning for a romantic ideal of something “so lovely” in her own life that she perceived to be in some way incommensurate with the rational, measured, successful identity she strove for. The romantic ideal of

fulfillment through a close and continuing intimate relationship continues to have a strong cultural hold for women (Trimberger, 2005), but it is often perceived to be in conflict with competing narratives of independence, financial and emotional autonomy and ‘personal growth’. I suggest that some of the intense conflict apparent in Maree’s drawing is also reflected here in her discomfort in claiming motherhood as a socially acceptable goal.

Embodying a mother’s fantasy

A further possible interpretation of Maree’s apparent confusion about motherhood being “something I really really want” appears in a segment in which she discusses her mother’s reaction to her not yet having had a child. She told me that her mother “wasn’t sure whether she could see me having kids when I was growing up”.

Lois: Because of the whole tomboy thing?

Maree: Yeah. Um and I think with my sister being so maternal and having all the kids, oh I used to say she’s had them for both of us, I’ve said that for years to sort of take the pressure off.

Lois: Mm.

Maree: ‘Cause she’s had four, so, um. And I think Mum was sort of living vicariously through each of us, like she had the maternal daughter and the career- minded one, and the independent one and the family one, and so she got, you know, we were so very different, so Mum was quite happy with me being there.

The segment suggests that, from Maree’s perspective, her mother had unconsciously resolved her own version of “feeling torn” by living a version of her own fantasies “vicariously” through her daughters. Maree appeared to see her mother as positioning her very differently in relation to her sisters. It seemed that Maree understood herself and her sister to be exemplars of different ways of being an adult woman in the 21st century, and while she wanted to be an independent career woman, she also longed to be a person who ‘falls in love’, ‘nests’ and is a selfless loving mother. This extract suggests that Maree’s framing of her situation, *vis a vis* her mother’s perception of her and her fantasies of what ‘mother’ looks like, constrained the possibilities that she saw to be available to her. Because she was positioned by others—and positioned herself—as the ‘tomboy’ of the family, she appeared to find it difficult to envisage herself as a mother in conventional terms. Under such circumstances it might have been difficult for Maree to recognise, make sense of, and acknowledge her own maternal fantasies.

4.6 Concluding discussion

Revisiting fantasy and maternal subjectivity

It is in this area of maternal fantasy that Law's "things that slip and slide" are at their most elusive in this project. I have suggested that making sense of it entails a particular understanding of both 'fantasy' and 'mother', and I have described how the 'porous' intersubjective relationship between a mother and her child, is tangled in the maternal fantasy that develops. At this point I want to summarize my argument in relation to these concepts in the light of the research material, and to take them one step further into the trans-subjective through attention to Bracha Ettinger's theoretical work.

The transition to motherhood is often discussed as a process that begins at conception, and continues as a woman moves through her pregnancy, anticipates the birth of her baby, and accommodates the huge physical, psychological and social changes that being a new mother creates.⁸⁶ Part of that adjustment, after the birth, is coming to terms with the embodied reality of motherhood and her baby—although of course they have been embodied in a different way throughout the pregnancy—and accommodating the distance between them and the fantasies of maternity and a child that have developed.

This is not to imply that embodied 'reality' takes the place of fantasy after the birth of a child, because fantasy continues to permeate the ways a woman takes up a maternal subjectivity, but rather that when women who do not go on to have a child, their maternal fantasies have the potential to continue unchecked by the embodied realities of a child or motherhood. This works both ways, since women who do go on to have a child and find the experience difficult may fantasize (perhaps in Winnicott's sense of 'fantasying') about how life might have been if they had *not* had a child; a fantasy that may play itself out in their daughters' ambivalent maternal fantasies. A number of participants spoke, as Lesley did, of having mothers who did not want to be a mother, or were explicitly ambivalent about it.

In this view of the development of a maternal subjectivity, 'being' a mother hinges on the embodiment of a child and, to a lesser extent, the embodied practices of caring for him or her. This defining factor has always been a little blurry—is one a mother if one's only baby has died, or if one is an adopting or surrogate mother with no further contact after birth, for example?—but the reality of a baby's embodiment is still the key factor, even if the definition

⁸⁶ See for example Miller (2005) and Thomson *et al* (2011)

of ‘motherhood’ is extended to encompass “genetic, gestational, and carer” mothers, as Welldon (2006) has done.

My strategy has been to foreground the role of conscious and unconscious fantasy as a further aspect of the development of maternal subjectivity. Stone (2011 p.167) writes that mothers experiences and development are organized in a “particular relational or psychical *position*—a distinctive subject-position”. My argument for a woman’s “sense of herself as a mother” existing even *before* she becomes a mother in genetic, gestational or care-giving terms extends Stone’s theorization of this “position” and hinges on the understanding that the development of the *fantasy* element of maternal subjectivity can be understood as a process that does not begin at birth when a woman ‘becomes’ a mother, nor even in pregnancy in relation to an embodied foetus, but rather takes place throughout her life. Indeed, given the way women talked about their fantasies of becoming a grandmother later in their life, and the impact of *their* mother’s fantasies on the development of their own—even before their conception—I suggest that a woman’s fantasies of maternity can be understood to be unlimited temporally, since they are linked to her mother’s own fantasies, and logically, to her mother’s and so forth.

These maternal fantasies are not limited to the experiences a woman had in relationship with her own mother as a baby and child growing up, since they are also imbued with the myriad social and cultural resources of motherhood in which she has been immersed. These shape her understandings of what it is to be selfish or unselfish, sexually attractive or otherwise, fulfilled or unfulfilled, loving and lovable, successful, feminine and so forth, and are constantly framing what it might be to be a mother. It is impossible to overstate the complexity and diversity of the development of these maternal fantasies, and they might be best understood to be boundless not only temporally as I have suggested, but also socially, and relationally.

I understand a woman’s maternal fantasies to be of a different order than other “possible lives” (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame 2003) she might have. Firstly they are uniquely loaded with the weight of social expectations of what a woman might *be* that still link femininity with motherhood in spite of the enormous cultural changes in (Western) women’s lives in the last 60 years or so; uniquely in the sense that all the other possibilities for subjectivity that women might take up—such as being an artist or a scientist or whatever—are not indexed to femininity in this way. Secondly, they are saturated with a woman’s developing sense of herself as an individual having begun within the context of her early maternal bodily relations—what Stone (2011, p.6) refers to as “the locus of a kind of presubjectivity embodied

between mother and child”—and later developed in intersubjective relationship with her mother.⁸⁷ Because of this saturation, women ‘know’ something of what it is to be a mother—through their intersubjective and trans-subjective experience as a child—in ways that they can not know the experiences of ‘artist’ or ‘scientist’, for example. I used Samantha’s vignette of the mutual recognition that passes between a mother and her very young child to illustrate aspects of this (section 4.3 of this chapter).

The interview material discussed in this chapter suggests that many women’s maternal fantasies are largely unconscious for many years—both in the sense of being in part constituted of archaic memories and therefore unavailable, and of being not accessed in conscious thought in a way I would describe as dormant—until they are ignited in some way. This ignition has usually been understood to be linked to a re-immersion in the viscosity of maternal body relations as a new mother (e.g. Stone 2011; Raphael-Leff 2009), but I have described how other experiences such as contact with babies and small children, a brief experience of pregnancy, or even a realization that one’s fertility is fading, have been a triggering factor. When I write of aspects of her fantasy being “ignited” by events in a woman’s life, I mean the way in which these events bring aspects of her fantasy into her conscious awareness; in Balint’s (1987, p.95) terms events move these aspects from ‘phantasy’ to ‘fantasy’, where they might be “played with”.^{88 89}

Drawing on the ‘matrixial’

The stretch that conceiving of maternal subjectivity in this way entails can be accomplished theoretically if one considers it through the lens of Ettinger’s (2006) notion of the matrixial borderspace.⁹⁰ For Ettinger, the originary trans-subjective matrixial stratum does not disappear, but after birth it is accompanied by other strata which are to do with partial separation and increasing individuation, alongside which it co-exists; in Ettinger’s words “it accompanies the phallic subjectivity all along its voyage” (2004, p.78), and matrixial processes continue throughout life. This perspective creates the possibility of identifying

⁸⁷ Of course, some babies and children are primarily cared for by their father or other individuals, however women are—and have historically been—the primary carers of infants and children, and the maternal figure is the “first orienting figure” (Stone 2012, p.34).

⁸⁸ I want to emphasise again that I am not suggesting that all women *should* have children, or that they *want* to have children, and that this desire is somehow thwarted or suppressed. In focusing on this aspect of women’s maternal subjectivity I have left aside the question of how women make the reproductive choices they do. The ambivalent nature of these fantasies, competing desires, and a variety of social factors all play a part in an increasing number of women choosing not to have children.

⁸⁹ Within their conscious awareness it seems circumstantially childless women are constrained in “playing with”—that is making meaning of—their responses because of a lack of opportunity to explore them with others. I discuss this further in Chapter 5.

⁹⁰ I discuss Ettinger’s concept of the matrixial in Chapter 2, pp.34-38.

events and contexts in a woman's life that contain traces of a maternal subjectivity where "the split [with the mother] collapses, yet difference is maintained" (Ettinger 2006, pp.196-197).

From this perspective, traces of the archaic trans-subjective relationship a woman has with her mother might be understood to exist *alongside* those of the later intersubjective relationship that develops as the daughter grows, and to permeate the fantasy dimension of the "relational or psychic position" that each woman develops.⁹¹ The 'ignition' of her fantasies of maternity that I have described can be understood to bring the trans-subjective stratum closer to the 'surface' of her conscious awareness (Hollway 2012b). It may be that the "sense of myself as a mother" is grounded not simply in an *imagining* of what it might be to be a mother, but rather in an archaic embodied experience of a woman's porous trans-subjective relationship with her mother in the late uterine period, *as well as* in the later relationship with her mother and other people and resources in her social world in the period after her birth and throughout her childhood.^{92 93} In this way Ettinger's matrixial concept adds a further dimension to my argument that aspects of the fantasy element of a woman's maternal subjectivity develops before maternity itself is embodied.

Ettinger (2006a, p.220) writes that matrixial space-time is "usually fore-closed or infolded inside more phallic dimensions and ignored". Women's experiences (and maternal desires) can be understood to be in tension at times between these strata since the weight of phallic logic, inscribed in language, lies in the necessity to develop what Hollway (2012a, p.30) describes as "that masculine gold standard of individuality"; an autonomous self. Even if early relations with the maternal body are not considered before birth as well as after it, these research materials illustrated the tensions that are created for young women through a set of assumptions about the individual's necessity to separate from early relations to the maternal

⁹¹ Since we are all "of woman born" (Rich 1976), this potential is also available to men, but it has different implications.

⁹² I use the word "imagining" in its popular sense here. It could be argued that all imagination is originally grounded in embodied experience in some way; however here I use it in the sense of something that is fabricated out of 'nothing'.

⁹³ This porous psychical relationship finds its embodied form in the phenomenon of microchimerism; the intermingling of cells from one person inside the body of another. The tissue that connects a pregnant woman with her unborn foetus is not an impenetrable barrier but a "selective border crossing". Scientists working in the field of microchimerism have found that fetal cells, genetically differentiated from those of the mother, continue to develop in her many years after the birth of a child. Work into their role is ongoing, and it is thought they may later play a protective role in inhibiting the development of some auto-immune diseases, and a healing role in injury, as they appear to "migrate" to injury sites (Shute, 2010).

body that are embodied within the dominant strands of our social imaginary.⁹⁴ Stone (2012, p.10) writes:

The most common modern version of these assumptions is that one must leave the maternal body behind to become an autonomous individual subject, the author and architect of one's experience and of the normative authority of the values and meanings to which one commits oneself.

This is the tension that De Marneffe refers to in the epigraph to this chapter, and the impasse that women such as Maree find themselves in, where becoming a mother and embodying her maternal fantasies is intensely desired, yet is perceived to be at odds with the goal of becoming an independent self.

In trying to identify indicators of a matrixial dimension to participants' fantasies I am very definitely in the territory of the "things that slip and slide". As I noted in Chapter 2, in her own work looking at the experience of new mothers through the lens of matrixial theory, Hollway (2012a, p.23) understood participants' repeated use of the word 'weird' to stand in for "the ineffable, something that is not readily explicable through language", pointing to "the extent that pregnancy cannot be expressed adequately in language and consequently perhaps it feels like it cannot be understood". In my own research materials I looked for times in participants' interviews where language failed them and they seemed stymied in their attempts to express their thoughts. For example, when Samantha was asked to elaborate on the "unique" relationship between mother and child, her voice suddenly dropped to a whisper and she answered not with an explanation, but with the vignette that for her captured the intimate mutuality of the connection between a mother and her child. I also paid attention to times when participants moved abruptly from their thoughts to their feelings, or to a sensory register. As I noted above, a number of participants used the term 'a sense of' to capture their experience of the *'isness'* of their fantasy child or maternity.

Weber and Mitchell (1995, p.35) write that "(d)rawings offer a different kind of glimpse into human sense-making than written or spoken texts do, because they can express that which is not easily put into words: the ineffable, the elusive, the not-yet-thought-through, the subconscious". I read this kind of matrixial sense-making in Lynn's completing her drawing of the sequential narrative of her life (as she had previously articulated it in her interview) by placing large red breasts overlaying it all, and explaining this by changing from a cognitive to a sensory register as an illustration of an intimacy she 'knows', but does not know, all at once.

⁹⁴ Taylor (2003, p.23) describes the concept of social imaginaries as "the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations".

I suggest that Lynn struggled to speak of something that is pre-discursive, as Hollway's participants did; to communicate the idea that a 'knowing' might be somehow experienced bodily, and yet it was not of her body.

There is no way I can 'know' in any conventional sense whether this interview material is 'evidence' of a matrixial dimension to women's fantasies of maternity. No one visiting her could see the baby shaping "everything" in Janine's home or the pony-riding daughter in Isabella's, the dense black asterisk lodged in Gina's womb or Lynn's physical experience of loss at having missed the opportunity to nurture. These are certainly "phenomena that are hardly caught by social science methods" (Laws 2004, p.2). I can however, identify their (literally) inexplicable quality, their intensity and their very private nature. In this way, this research makes these fantasies and understandings of self, which cannot be articulated in a broader context, visible and accessible.

Chapter 5: Loss and mourning in the experience of circumstantial childlessness

(A)bsences make themselves known in routine passages, in everyday encounters and in the management of ordinary affairs.

(Meier *et al* 2013, p.424)

5.1 Introduction: “the grieving for something not fulfilled”

Um [long pause, and then puffing breath out] it’s not loss in the sense of something known. You know how if one loses a parent, or loses a sibling, or, you know loss in the sense of um [pause] having *known* something, and then losing it. It’s not loss in, in *that* sense, and yet it is loss of [pause] I don’t know, a vision or a hope or a dream or an expectation, or [stop]. So there is grieving that goes with it. Just, it’s, I don’t know that it’s the *same* grieving as the loss of something that was known to exist. But I think it exists. That [pause] that sense of loss, and the grieving for something not fulfilled is, is, you know, does, does exist. Yeah. Yes.

Deborah

“A vision or a hope or a dream or an expectation”

Loss and suffering permeated all the research materials in this project. Sadness, yearning, regret, anger, perplexity and a sense of feeling misjudged, misunderstood, isolated or unrecognized threaded through every interview. Here, Deborah attempted to articulate the maternal fantasy that she understood was lost. Though she struggled to verbalise *what* is ‘lost’, she insisted that her loss is real and claimed her experience as ‘grief’. Her repetitions at the end of the excerpt above suggested a determination to defend its existence against a challenge; that its validity might perhaps be called into question.

Read in the context of the whole of Deborah’s research material, this hesitation about the social recognition of her experience of loss has a particular pertinence, and the “something that was known to exist” a particular charge. There is no glimpse here of Alisdair and Elinor, Deborah’s fantasy children whom I discussed in the previous chapter, or of her “sense of myself as a mother”, because neither of these was “known” (by others) to exist. They were rather, as Mantell (2003, p.229) writes, “in a sly state of half-becoming [where] they lurk in the shadowland of chances missed”. Although it was unintended, with them in mind the “it” that is the subject of “(b)ut I think it exists” can be read as having an unintended double meaning; it is possible that she is referring both to her maternal fantasy, that *she* ‘knows’ to exist, and also to her grief at not bringing it into existence through pregnancy, birth and parenting.

In the previous chapter I argued that many of these women appear to have developed a sense of themselves as a mother from the very beginning of their lives that is both conscious and unconscious, and I attempted to pin down the fantasies that “slip and slide” through their interviews and drawings. In this chapter and the following chapter I provide a psychosocial account of their experiences when these fantasies are not embodied. My focus here is on the losses, grieving and isolation women talked about. I argue for a conceptualization of ‘grieving’ to encompass the responses to losses that are not material and are not related to a specific temporal point, and I explore the ways that grieving is tied up with questions of agency and the notion of ‘choice’.

5.2 What—or whom—is lost?

(I)f you’ve never been pregnant and you’ve never had a miscarriage, you’re not grieving something that’s died, you’re grieving something that has never had a chance to start. Yeah, I don’t know what we grieve for, but it is really very real. (...) It’s losing a dream, losing [pause] something that’s kind of, I just [pause] innate in you, I don’t know...

Isabella

I guess it’s weird isn’t it because you haven’t really lost anything because you didn’t have it in the first place in a way. But there’s that, but I yeah, but there’s that loss because you haven’t got it, you haven’t had that chance, yeah, yeah. It’s, I suppose you could almost, you could describe it as grief really because you, I don’t know, it must be a, I suppose it’s such a powerful thing this urge to have children to, you know, so yeah I think you could call it grief, yeah.

Irene

It is difficult to make sense of these participants’ stories of loss in terms of existing theoretical accounts of loss and mourning; both in terms of what is lost and of the process that women go through in grieving for these losses. In trying to clarify *what* is lost—the root loss with which the idiosyncratic secondary losses of each woman are associated—like Isabella and Irene I found it hard to shift beyond the presumption of material loss; beyond the idea of a ‘something’ or ‘someone’ that one once had and was now lost, that is deeply embedded in both psychoanalytic literature and popular understandings of grieving. These two women fell back on a presumption of an “innate” human “urge” to have children to explain the intensity of their yearning, and hence of their grief when it was not fulfilled, but although they were certain of their experience of loss and of grieving for it, they remained perplexed about how to conceptualize and talk about the object of their grief. Like Isabella and Irene, many participants struggled to name *what* was lost in their experience of circumstantial childlessness, but they were explicit about the personal reality of their loss. A number of women referred to the loss of a dream as Isabella did, but since ‘dreams’ and ‘fantasies’ have such an ethereal, evanescent quality in popular understanding these women fall back on a

biologically based notion to make sense of the intensity of the loss they feel. Framed through Ettinger's theory their words might be understood to speak to the "ineffable" (Hollway 2012a, p.23) quality of the matrixial in these fantasies and in what is perceived to be lost.

Freud's paper "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917/1954) has dominated and shaped the development of the literature around grief in Western thought for almost a century now. Grief and grieving have been framed predominantly within a Freudian psychoanalytic discourse or the psychological accounts that developed out of it. Although he wrote of mourning as "the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction *which has taken the place of one* such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on" (Freud 1917/1954, p. 243, my italics), there remains at the root of his theorizing the presumption of the material loss of an individual, and a loss event that can be pinpointed to a particular moment. Popular understandings of grief that have emerged out of these psychological accounts are still primarily associated with the losses of bereavement. In the past thirty years loss and its associated grief have been interpreted more broadly in individuals' or communities' lives—as an expected outcome of divorce for example, or of a disaster such as the Canterbury earthquakes—but even with this more generous framing there is still a presumption of the loss, at a particular time, of something which one once *had*.⁹⁵

It was only when I came back to a focus on fantasy, and to the psychic reality of these fantasies of maternity and a child for participants, that I was able to identify what is lost, and make sense of the grieving that most of these circumstantially childless women talked about doing. Losses such as these are better understood when the question shifts from *what* is lost to include *whom*; when women's fantasies of maternity and a child or children are understood to be charged with the powerful reality that I discussed in Chapter 4, and when the ways in which these fantasies permeate women's lives is acknowledged. "We are always, already, utterly embedded in relationships" (Thomson (2007, p.1) writes, and it is our relationships with others that create the "I" we understand ourselves to be. A child creates a woman as a mother and thereby creates a web of belonging both in a family and in the company of generations of mothers. For these women the loss of the potential to embody their biological

⁹⁵ In the early stages of writing this thesis the area in NZ in which I live was struck by a series of earthquakes, two of which caused major damage and significant loss of life. Over an extended period life of the entire broader community was seriously disrupted by the impact of these events. I have paid particular attention to the way in which grief has been framed in public and private contexts throughout this time. While the losses experienced by individuals whose family members or close friends were killed have been prioritised in public mourning, it is clear that grieving has also come to be acknowledged in the lives of individuals and the whole community as an effect of loss more broadly: loss of home and property, jobs, community facilities such as libraries, familiar loved landmarks and public spaces, schools and so forth. The focus has always been however, on the loss of "something known to exist"; the obviously material such as buildings and familiar landscapes, and also the less tangible 'things' such as a sense of security or predictability.

maternity through the birth of a child signals the loss of this fantasy relationship as they have understood it until now, and consequently of this fantasy aspect of themselves that has developed throughout their lives, including—from a matrixial perspective—before their birth.

Each of these women grieved in some way for this “sense of myself as a mother”, and for the idiosyncratic meanings that being a mother and having a biological child held for her. Some grieved for the child of their fantasies, and for the experience of nurturing that child in an embodied way through carrying, giving birth, and feeding him or her. Some grieved when they had lost the opportunity to be called “Mum”, and to be seen by their child and others in their social worlds as a mother.

Loss has a quality of folding in on itself, creating a loss-within-a-loss. Although the loss of their realization of maternal fantasies may exist for all of these women, the meanings they ascribed to that loss was idiosyncratic for each one. Envisaging their loss in this way makes it possible to take account of the range of responses women have to not having had a biological child. Understanding ‘whom’ or ‘what’ is lost in her fantasy of maternity is the terrain of meaning-making, and I will discuss developments around this aspect of grief theory in more detail further below.

5.3 Kleinian theoretical roots of mourning

I turn now to a discussion of the process of grieving and adaptation that I understand these participants to be engaged in. In Chapter 2 I discussed an object relations perspective of the process of mourning. It is usefully summarized in the following quotation from Klein:

In normal mourning the individual re-introjects and reinstates, as well as the actual lost person, his loved parents—who are felt to be his ‘good’ inner objects. His inner world, the one which he has built up from his earliest days onwards, in his phantasy was destroyed when the actual loss occurred. The rebuilding of this inner world characterizes the successful work of mourning.

(1940, pp.166-167)

Klein’s theory is based on the restoration of the lost loved person, and the loved ‘good’ objects of his or her infancy, in the bereaved person’s “inner world”. Once securely introjected, he or she is able to draw more confidently on a sense that “life inside and outside will go on after all, and that the lost loved object can be *preserved* within” (Klein 1940.1986, p. 163, my italics). I see this process happening in a bereaved person when he or she reaches a point of taking pleasure in their memories of a loved person; drawing on their internalized sense of that person in the ways they construct a new life without the physical presence of him or her in their lives.

This mourning—grieving and preserving—is not to be understood as a linear process but rather one that changes over time. Klein (1940/1986, p.164) notes that “in mourning, as well as in infantile development, inner security comes about in waves”. Craib (1994, pp.25-26) described it as:

(A) continual movement between the manic defences (and it is often possible to *believe* that we have overcome this grief through discovering new levels of creativity) and the depressive position (where, for a while, we might believe that we are irretrievably caught up in the grief).

Extrapolating to the focus of this study, Deborah implied this kind of movement in this extract:

I think through a variety of people, um, relationships, um, and probably a, a reasonably prolonged period of, um, quite structured personal development, you know, I've sort of, every time it comes up [pause] I look at it again. [voice shakes] I wouldn't say I've dealt with it, you know [pause]. I think probably, um [pause] hearing the shake in my voice now, feeling the tears in my eyes, um [pause] it's quite likely that I will [pause] I know [pause] talk about it with [her husband], ah, [...]because I suspect that from today there'll be things that I've heard myself say [voice shakes a lot], for the first time, or [pause] um, yeah, it will bring stuff up.

Managing “sorrow and pain”

I will come back to the issue of ‘preservation’ in Chapter 6, but first want to comment on the range of strategies women described in response to the “sorrow and pain” (Klein 1940/1986, p.156) of loss. Many talked about denying or suppressing the pain of the “pining” for the loved lost object and the “longing to regain” it that Klein (1940/1986, p. 151) proposed was central to the depressive position. Irene, for example, spoke of the feelings that seeing a “cute kid and a happy family” would trigger for her. I asked her how she handled this and she replied:

I suppose you just bury it. I'm very good at burying things, I tend to block things out, um, they just get shut away in the dark deep recesses of my mind and come out, get dragged out every so often and then very quickly put back again, yeah, because they hurt so yeah.

Irene's use of “suppose” and “the dark, deep recesses of my mind” suggests that, for her, there was some awareness of this denial being a partly conscious, but largely unconscious process of refusal to acknowledge her painful feelings. Maree also commented about this, saying “it's too painful to sort of keep at the front or wherever it might be, you know, with everyday life, um, so I pack it back there somewhere, but it's still there”. Klein (1940/18986, p. 152) wrote that “(w)ithout partial and temporary denial of psychic reality the ego cannot bear the disaster by which it feels itself threatened when the depressive position is at its height”.

Many participants also talked about the ways in which they engaged conscious cognitive strategies such as positive self-talk. Sophia, for example said:

I mean you do feel like a failure, you really do, but you can't be a victim all your life so you've just kind of got to pick yourself up, dust yourself off and get on with it, pretty much. I mean, you know, [...] (t)here's people worse off in the world than what we are, um, there's just a huge chunk that's missing. But it's, you can't let it rule your life.

In Sophia's repeated use of "you" there is a strong sense of self-admonition that was very common in many of these women's interviews. It reflects dominant cultural influences in loss and grieving in the ways some of these women responded to their situation. Kelly's interview, for example, epitomized a valorization of a stoic, no-nonsense approach to life's losses and disappointments, particularly those that are disenfranchised in the ways that circumstantial childlessness is.⁹⁶ She was 38 at the time of the interview, and had chosen to be with a man who had two young boys and was unwilling to have more. She told me that she had moved through a time of distress that she would not have a biological child of her own to mainly "being thankful for what I do have", but commented "(i)t could change overnight if he was to wake up tomorrow morning and say that he wanted a child".

Lois: What do you think you'd feel if he said that?

Kelly: [quick breath in] Um. All of the emotions, I think I'd have all of them. I, I, you know obviously I'd be quite elated, but I'd also be very scared and apprehensive [...]

Lois: So where would the elation come from Kelly?

Kelly: Um [pause] yeah, the, the, I guess those feelings that I've been [pause] suppressing or putting to aside. The feelings like wow, yeah, I would actually get to be a Mum [pause]. Yeah, yeah. Yep [long pause] mmm [pause] I think that probably would be [pause] yeah [pause] it, it certainly um [pause] yeah [pause] it certainly would be there. Yeah, I haven't [pause] doused that flame entirely. But yeah, I would still have those feelings.

Lois: Is that the process you see, that you've gone through a process of kind of rationally thinking this through and sort of dousing the little flames that flicker up as they come?

Kelly: Mmm. Mm I think that probably is it. Because I am the sort to be reasonably practical in the sense that, if you, if you dwell on something or if you wish for something that has, that, is not going to happen or whatever, that you end up digging yourself into just a big hole of depression and it's just, it's just not worth it. It's not worth putting that sort of pressure on yourself."

Kelly's spontaneous use of the metaphor of 'dousing the flame' of her fantasy is extraordinarily powerful in its evocation of both the vitality of this fantasy and her determined

⁹⁶ I introduce Kelly in Chapter 3 on p.75. I quote this segment of her individual interview in full again here for ease of reading.

mastery of it. The question about her “elation” appeared to catch her out, and she stumbled in her otherwise mainly smooth narrative. Hearing herself say “I would actually get to be a Mum” almost overwhelmed her with her longing to embody her fantasies of being a mother, but she eventually recovered herself and reverted to what in Kleinian terms might be understood to be a ‘manic’ defence of denial and triumph against the pain of grief in her efforts to maintain control over it. Her change of pronoun from “I” to “you” in the final paragraph is significant. It represented a strong voice of sensible reason that is a culturally learned defence against the pain of difficult emotions.

I found myself wondering whether Kelly’s notion of being “practical” in the face of loss was an example of the stereotype of New Zealanders taking a commonsense, no-nonsense, ‘no drama’ approach to life’s vicissitudes, or whether it was part of a broader Western minimising of strong feelings, in response to non-death losses in particular. It is interesting to speculate on how the processes of mourning that Klein outlined might be expressed in differing ways in different cultural settings. In places where the outward expression (and ‘inward’ tolerance) of high emotion is more encouraged than it is in New Zealand, the idea of being “practical” about one’s grieving might seem unthinkable.

Meaning-making

Kelly described her mother as “hanging out to be a grandma” but said “she’s really good about that sort of thing. She’s really good about saying you know, if it doesn’t happen, it doesn’t happen and you know not pushing [...] She’s never asked, so, um yeah. And that’s probably, um, it’s probably where I get my thinking from as well”. I read Kelly’s response and meaning-making around her experience psychosocially as a product of her psychobiography (in particular her mother’s similarly stoic response to not having grandchildren), her unconscious processing of loss, and the predominance of cultural ‘rules’ of grieving that emphasize these qualities as desirable.

The responses these women made to the pain of loss were not only a product of their past but also became part of their way of going on in the world; that is, these strategies were not simply coping strategies that disappeared once the pain of loss had faded, but rather became part of a complex process of meaning-making (Neimeyer 2001) in their lives.⁹⁷ Comparing

⁹⁷ The term ‘meaning-making’ in this context comes out of a growing body of work in the bereavement field that considers meaning reconstruction in response to loss as a central process in grieving (for example see Neimeyer 2001; 1998; Attig 2001). Marris (1974) adumbrated this paradigm from a psychosocial perspective when he envisioned grieving as “the tension between conserving and relinquishing a world of meanings undercut by the loss of a defining attachment” (cited in Neimeyer 2001, p.4). I consider this paradigm to be different from but not incommensurate with the object relations approach that underlies my theoretical position in this thesis.

themselves with others as way of minimising the painfulness of their experience as Sophia did in the extract quoted above was common, but as part of this process of making meaning of their experience several of these participants also often used this comparison as a means of connecting that experience with a broader perspective that loss is a part of living. Gina, for example, said “I’ve talked myself through it too. I don’t have a friend who has gotten everything they wanted in life, I’ve never met such a person”. Reflecting on her experience Kim, said:

I just think at some level we have pain in our lives you know, and [pause] it’s almost more about how you [pause] endure through things, and um [pause] and I think, like I say at some level I would acknowledge you know I’m sorry I didn’t have children, but [pause] I’m sorry about lots of things, you know, [...] and I think I sort of see enough people around me [pause] who’ve got other stuff, and I admire people who [pause] persevere, through adversity.

Rather than a kind of ‘others are worse off’ self-admonition that Sophia’s extract suggested Kim and Gina’s responses suggested that they understood perseverance through adversity to be a part of what it is to be human, in a way that resonates well with Craib’s (1994) notion of the normal “disappointments” of life. ‘Perseverance through adversity’ is a common trope that is part of the particular set of sociocultural resources available to these women. Socially such a response is often characterized as ‘brave’ and ‘courageous’. As well, it may be a successful defence against painful and frightening losses in early life; a mother who left or died when their child was aged two to three was part of both Kim and Gina’s life stories. For all of these participants, the meaning they made of their circumstances was a complex mix of the conscious and unconscious, and the overlapping of the psychological and the social in their lives.

(A)ny pain caused by unhappy experiences, whatever their nature, has something in common with mourning. It reactivates the infantile depressive position, and encountering and overcoming adversity of any kind entails mental work similar to mourning.

Klein (1940/1986, p.164)

Klein’s (1940/1986) paper “Mourning and its relation to manic-depressive states” built on her earlier (1935/1986) paper “A contribution to the psychogenesis of manic-depressive states”. In extending this to the experience of mourning more broadly, like Freud before her, Klein also wrote in terms of the death of a loved person. In her theorizing about the period in mourning when “the mourner feels more strongly (...) that the lost loved object can be preserved within” (1940/1986, p.163), however, Klein wrote more generally that “suffering can become productive” and she extended this possibility to a broader interpretation of losses. She wrote that in this period “painful experiences of all kinds” may “bring out” creative expression such as painting or writing, and individuals may become more capable of

appreciation of people and things, and more tolerant of others. She understood this “enrichment” in the creative capacities of people to be “gained through processes similar to the steps in mourning” that an infant makes in achieving the manic-depressive position.

While Klein was careful to distinguish the “mental work” of unhappy experiences from mourning (for a person who has died), and was not specific about which aspects of such experiences are in common with it, I think I am justified in extending her theorizing about the process people work through in mourning to the losses of circumstantial childlessness.

Klein’s discussion of the re-experiencing of the depressive position is relevant to the way these women talk about their grief at not becoming mothers. Her discussion of the psychic work entailed in grieving and its relationship to early infant emotional experiences helps to explain the intensity of women’s grief responses. Using these theoretical tools one can understand their grieving for the unique losses of childlessness to be laced with a sense of the precarious nature of their first early experience of grief, the threat of overwhelming emotions and ambivalence, and the fear of chaotic disintegration that it entailed.

In “Mourning and Manic-Depressive States” Klein also pointed to the part played by the acknowledgement and support of others in the bereaved person’s social world in a way that adumbrated a psychosocial approach. She wrote that at the time the infant is struggling with the feared loss of the internal ‘good’ object of his mother, the ongoing embodied presence of his mother is a great help to him, and she related this to the experience of a mourning adult:

Similarly, if the mourner has people whom he loves and who share his grief, and if he can accept their sympathy, the restoration of the harmony in his inner world is promoted, and his fears and distress are more quickly reduced.

(1940/1986, p.165)

Her words have important implications for this research because they point to the additional and ongoing distress and psychic disharmony that ensues when there are not others about with whom a mourning woman can “share” her grief, or if she is unable to accept their “sympathy”. This was the experience of many of the participants, as I will discuss and illustrate in the sections that follow.

5.4 The impact of time

Unlike many other life losses, the loss of the potential to embody their fantasies of maternity is one that develops over time as women’s fertility wanes. Although there was sometimes a pivotal moment at which these women apprehended their potential childlessness more intensely, inevitably the recognition that one will not be a mother does not take place all at

once, and is not grasped all at once; rather it can be understood as a continuum along which each participant moved both forwards and backwards, usually over a period of 10 to 15 years from the early 30s to the onset of menopause in the mid 40s.⁹⁸

One of the difficulties that emerged in the construction of this chapter was to do with generating research materials around the theme of grieving; not because there *was* no grieving for participants to talk about, but rather that there was too much. This problem reflected the long process that grieving for these losses involves. That process is tied up with the slow decline in individual women's fertility, the intensity of grief that many of these women experienced, and the ways in which their making sense of their losses and expressing grief is constrained by social 'rules' about who has the 'right' to mourn, as I discuss below. These factors meant that although every woman I interviewed talked about grief, it was difficult to speak to anyone whose grieving was immediate, in the sense that it would have been if I had been interviewing people in the 'throes' of grief with a recent loss such as a bereavement, for example.

Although the process is inevitably long because of the slow waning of fertility, many of the older participants identified an extended period of intense mourning in their 30s which gradually changed as they moved towards their 40s. Connie's drawing exemplified this. She was 44 at the time of the interviews, and hers was one of several drawings that conceived of circumstantial childlessness in temporal terms as a linear process from her 20s through to the present day.

⁹⁸ Some participants attempted to fix a point in their lives ("if it hasn't happened by the time I'm 40") at which they would decide that the time for hoping to have a child had passed, but in all cases the point moved forward when they reached it. It seemed the onset of the menopause was the point at which most women abandoned the possibility, but this is also not a point but rather a slowly unfolding continuum, and with the development of assisted reproductive technologies this too is called into question. A number of participants raised the issue of public music and film personalities having the capacity to have a child after menopause through A.R.T., pushing the limits of the continuum further out still.

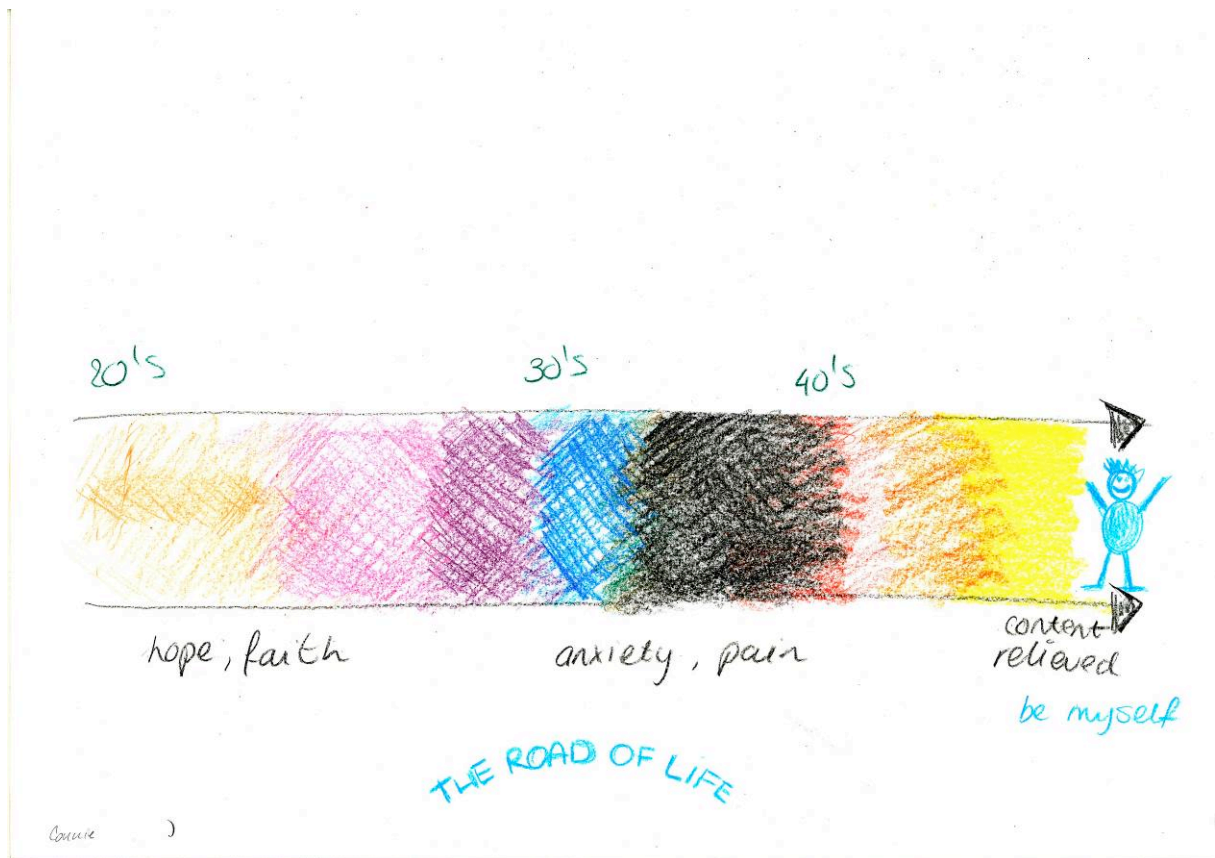


Figure 4: Connie's Drawing

She described it in this way:

In my 20s I'd just had, you know, faith, and hope, that it was all going to happen at some point. And um, so, probably just was, um leading quite a rosy life, and enjoying myself, and um, but then, in my 30s I, um, um I, yeah. My friends started having families, and um, and, I wasn't in the, wasn't in the right relationship or not in a relationship, and towards the end of my 30s really the anxiety and the pain, the black part [taps drawing] was very strong. Probably until my early 40s.

For these older women, it is only in retrospect that the finality of their loss of the potential to embody their fantasies became clear. They spoke poignantly and often tearfully of their grief, but talked about their times of intense grieving being in the past. Gina, for example said "[It was] "really hard. *Really* hard. And sad. I felt sad and as if I didn't belong, and I felt as if I didn't have a [pause], a signature (...) that it wouldn't make any difference if I didn't exist". Her choice of the metaphor of a "signature" gives a sense of the intensity of her grieving and the way she perceived her loss to define her at that time. Many of these older women told me they would not have been able to talk to me a few years earlier because their grief then was very much more painful and consistently present for them.⁹⁹ At the time of interview they talked about it still being triggered at times, but having been ameliorated by the long process of adaptation that I discuss in the next chapter.

⁹⁹ This is consistent with my experience of people grieving other major life losses such as the death of someone close or the breakdown of a relationship.

Younger participants also spoke of their sense of loss and times of grieving but their experience was always tempered with their hope that things could change and they might yet become mothers.¹⁰⁰ In the following segment, Maree talked about the internal dialogue she engaged in to accommodate the difference between the life she expected and the one she was living:

I think where my reality's different from how I saw myself being or something similar to that [pause] so there's psychological and emotional pain if I stay in that place of dissonance. So I pour my energy into my work and tell myself that's [pause] okay for me at the moment and I'm hap [stop], well I am [pause], I convince myself that I'm happy. [laughter] But I am happy, um, um, with, with that and, because I think to pull out of that and really delve into it [pause] would reveal more grief than what I'm perhaps aware of.(...) (It's too painful to sort of keep at the front or wherever it might be, you know, with everyday life, um, so I pack it back there somewhere, but it's still there.

In her words “for the moment” Maree pointed to the key factor that differentiates the younger women’s narratives from those of older women I interviewed. Time runs a parallel track with fertility in women’s lives. Where the older participants saw themselves as running out—or having already run out—of time and fertility, these were potentials that Maree saw herself as still possessing. That possession offered her the possibility of a different reproductive future, and the choice to set aside for now the painfulness of confronting what she saw as a potential future grief of unknown dimensions. “(F)or the moment” carries with it an awareness of an unsettling impermanence however, and Maree spoke elsewhere of the way in which women, unlike men, “have time against us”. She understood herself as being inevitably in conflict with time—the heavily underlined “tick, tick, tick” of her drawing—because of the constraints of female embodiment. When I asked her if there was a “niggling anxiety” about time passing, Maree’s repeated affirmations and sharp breath in indicated her concern: “yeah, definitely, yeah, [breath in], no that’s accurate”.

Four women told me that they had friends who were living in the time between these two stages, when their chances of having a child were becoming slight, but it was still possible. They said, however, that although these women were very interested in the project, they felt unable to talk to me because their grief was simply too raw. I suggest that talking about their sense of loss would have been very painful but also, since they did not know me, their concerns about the social legitimacy of their grieving may have been particularly marked. I return to this issue further below.

¹⁰⁰ During the time I was engaged in this research I knew of at least three participants who went on to have a biological child.

5.5 Losses within a loss

Folded within the loss of the potential to embody their fantasies are the idiosyncratic secondary losses each woman experiences. When I asked Sonya what was lost if she did not have a child, the following response came very quickly, as one that had already been well explored and rehearsed in her thoughts:

I always think having a child is an extension of the love that you have with your partner. I see that. And it's something that you obviously um, share, and of course the, the life of a little human being. I mean, gosh you know. And I think, when I see friends that have had children there's something different [pause] about them after they've had a child, I think. Giving birth and that whole, I mean God, it's amazing, isn't it. So I think there's something very, very special in that itself and I think, I don't know, it's like a glow or [pause] I don't know what it is but, yeah, but something about women that have, have children, and it, it extends beyond that, you know, my parents won't be grandparents, you know, my brother and sister won't be uncle and aunties, I, I won't have children that will be friends with, you know be cousins to their children, um, I won't have children that will grow up with my friends' children, um when I die, what will I, who will I give all of my jewellery to? [laughs] Who will I pass on, you know [pause], there's all, all those sorts of things, it's the whole, whole picture [pause]. I'll never, I'll never have that. I'll never, you know, I won't have that, that family or that love or those [stop] and all your friends have died and [pause] you know there's nothing, to, that passes on a part of you, so yeah, there's all those things too, you know, it's not just you, it goes beyond that.

Embodying relationship

Sonya's list of losses includes many that other participants raised. It begins with the opportunity to embody the love shared between her and her partner in the creation of a child. In speaking of an "extension of the love" she implied that a child has the potential to embody and make manifest the power of the otherwise invisible bond between her and her partner. This was expressed over and over by participants and underpinned one part of why exploring having a child on their own did not interest many women. Gina, for example, said "I really wanted to have *his* child, and I wasn't, you know, wasn't interested in considering other options for quite a long time. I wanted to have one with *him*". In a time when reproductive technologies make it possible for women to have a child on their own, when their reason for being circumstantially childless is often (at least ostensibly) the lack of a willing partner, this strong motivation many women have to make this a "shared project" with someone they love may be underestimated.

Embodying maternity

Sonya moved quickly to an attempt to articulate a key difference between her and women who have had a baby. Her use of the popular metaphor of "a glow" covers her struggle to find words to address what Hollway (2012a, p.21), drawing on Ettinger's matrixial theory, has

described as the “language-defying state prior to birth”. There is a strong sense of a mystery that she both ‘knew’ somehow but could not express in words; one senses that the “something different” that she perceived exceeds the “pregnant glow” with which popular discourse provides her. This is the loss of an opportunity to participate in the mystery of being a woman in relationship with a child; a mystery that she knew intersubjectively and trans-subjectively as an infant and child and created in her fantasy, but was unable to embody and realise as an adult. There is a sense of the feeling that she had ‘missed out’—a term many participants used—on something “very very special” that she perceived to have the power to transform her.

The idea of motherhood as transformative is widely held. Baraitser (2009, p.52) writes that maternal subjectivity is “a fundamentally changed or transformed state, a state at or beyond the border that we once would have recognized as a self-boundary, and from which we may glimpse ourselves anew”. From Ettinger’s (Lichtenberg-Ettinger 1997, p.381) perspective, this is a “bi-directional though not symmetrical” transformation, in which both the infant-to-be and mother-to-be transform one another. Sonya’s “very, very special” captures this sense of transformation, though it appears to gloss over the often overwhelming nature of it. Baraitser (2009, p.52, italics in original) writes:

(M)otherhood’s transformative potential resides in its ability to cause a kind of *psychic crisis* in the lives of women. If crises can prompt breakdown, they can also allow a reconfiguration of our relation to new and necessary fictions of who we once were, are, and would like to be.

Almost all of the women talked about their regret at the loss of this opportunity to experience the embodied relationship of motherhood: developing a pregnant belly and a sense of the growing foetus, giving birth, breastfeeding, and the physical sensations of caring for a baby and child. Toni, for example, said “I love the idea of seeing my growing belly and, and nourishing of the baby and experiencing childbirth and breast feeding”. Toni’s niece lived with her three days a week from the time when she was a very little baby, and as a child called her her “other mother”. Toni described their relationship as “different” to the one her niece had with her biological mother but she was still involved “watching a child grow, being involved in those decisions about, you know, her wellbeing. And, and her daily life, making her school lunch, picking her up from school, those sorts of things, supervising homework”. These are the kinds of daily physical and organisational intimacies that women’s fantasies of maternity consisted of, and they mourned the absence of these intimacies in their lives. Toni said engagement in her intensive mothering relationship with her niece “softened” her grief at

not having her own child but “it still didn’t give me what the experience of biological motherhood would have given me”.¹⁰¹

Social recognition

With “it extends beyond that” Sonya pointed to the ways the meaning of not having a biological child expands beyond her both relationally and temporally, creating a tumbling string of losses that she perceived to stretch horizontally throughout her wider family and vertically through time and into the future. Becoming a mother would provide her with a means of taking part in the ongoing construction of the intergenerational relationships that thread through families and connect people within them (Thomson *et al* 2011); for her a child would be an agent of transformation, (re)creating her as a mother, her parents as grandparents, her siblings as aunts and uncles and so forth.

Along with the loss of having an embodied relationship with a child through pregnancy “it extends beyond that” also points to the social identity that Sonya perceived mothering would provide and the acknowledgement and validation that goes with this. Sonya helped care for her partner’s two sons each week, but for her this did not constitute being a mother. There is an irony to this aspect of her maternal fantasies since women who are biological mothers are often concerned with the *lack* of social recognition given to the actual work of mothering; there is often more attention paid to pregnancy and birth, but not as much appreciation of what is entailed in being a mother of an older or adult child.¹⁰²

Many women talked about children giving potential access to social worlds that are unavailable to them without children, and from which they felt excluded. Deborah, for example, said, “[Parents] have some freedoms, or some places or roles in society that they are granted or freely given, because they’re parents”. As a woman without children “there’s a sense in which you’re excluded from the world of children”. Some women talked about feeling marginalized by others through their sense that they were judged as unacceptable because they were not mothers. Deborah spoke about it in terms of her not being *acceptable*. Here she struggled to make sense of it:

For me it’s about not being acceptable. Some judgment being made about me not being acceptable. Somehow there’s something about *me* that isn’t acceptable. (...) I feel the judgment is, sometimes, is that [pause] if I’m without children, then I don’t like them, I don’t want to be involved with them, don’t understand them, ah, don’t have experience, won’t be any use. Um, I don’t know; some sense in which people without children are not [pause] *able* [pause] around children. Or, [pause] ah, not just not able, but not interested in, not, um, yeah. I find that a sort of gross assumption.

¹⁰¹ I explore these aspects of Toni’s story further in Chapter 6 p.182.

¹⁰² I discuss the issues of social recognition further in Chapter 6 pp.181-184.

For Deborah the sense of not being acceptable as a person coalesced around her suspicion that, because she doesn't have children, she is in some way judged as being lacking in relation to them and this sets her apart from the world of children in other people's eyes. For her, and for almost all the women, there was a strong feeling that they were marginalized by some others in their social worlds. Many spoke of a resulting loss of a sense of belonging. Kim was the only participant who spoke of resisting this marginalization. Speaking about other people's responses to her circumstantial childlessness she said, "I couldn't care less; I'm not a conformist, and if people have a problem, fuck them. You know?"

From an object relations perspective this sense of being judged might be interpreted to be part of the sense of persecution that mourning individuals experience in their relationships with others. Klein (1940/1986, p.156) wrote that when a woman loses a child through death her "early dread of being robbed by a 'bad' retaliating mother is reactivated and confirmed", along with her sorrow and the pain of mourning.¹⁰³ She considered this sense of persecution to be particularly painful because "as a result of an increase in ambivalence and distrust, friendly relations with people, which might at that time be so helpful, become impeded". It may be that there are times when an apparently innocent remark that may have even been intended to be encouraging is experienced as thoughtless and hurtful. Janine described an incident at a social occasion:

(Y)ou're always asked if you have children. Um, and I've said, I was asked this particular night, I said, "No," and, um, this woman said, "Oh and is it as *glamorous* as I imagine it to be?" And, you know, you just think, "Look lady you've got no idea". And what, I mean what kind of question is that? Was she trying to be, fill a gap, you know, of, with words or was she actually serious?

On the other hand, other participants' stories of exclusion or judgment were unequivocal. Deborah also told a story of being asked whether or not she had children, by a woman who was a midwife:

(A)nd I said 'no, we don't have any children', and she said 'oh, why not?' I thought, 'sorry?' [laughs]. From a midwife I thought that was the height of gross insensitivity! [laughs] You know, given that as a midwife she should be *perfectly* well aware that there were some people who chose not, there were some people that desperately wanted to, and couldn't, um, etcetera, etcetera. (...) Um, and I also [pause] remember, then, she made some throwaway comment about, 'oh, I always think people who don't have children are incredibly selfish'.

¹⁰³ Klein here wrote in part from her own experience. Her paper "Mourning and its relation to manic-depressive states" was published six years after her eldest son had been killed in a climbing accident (Mitchell 1986).

An investment in the future

Sonya went on to articulate her fantasy of a child who is a vehicle *through* which to pass aspects of herself, and *to* which to pass the things by which she has created herself in the past and present, on into the future. She looked to a child to be a still-living witness to her life in the world when all the other people who make up her present social world have died. Her “jewellery” might be understood to stand in for the aspects of herself that are precious. Passing it (them) on to her child is a way of creating a trace of her mortality, without which she fears that the ‘she’ she understands herself to be would be permanently extinguished.

This idea of the loss of a child who in some way would carry her or others she loved on into a time beyond a woman’s biological life, was very strong in women’s narratives. Irene, for example said, “I guess the line finishes with me; there’s nothing, there’s no continuation, (...) there’s no legacy, there’s nothing you, there’s nothing that, like it’s just you and when you die there’s nothing to say that you were here”. For Lynn, having a child would have been a way of carrying her loved husband into the future; “My husband’s quite a lot older than me, and feelings of I suppose, wanting to [pause] have a, a, a little [small nervous laugh, and shaky voice] umm [pause] him, in a way”. For some other women, a child gave meaning to the ways the present and the future are linked. Sophia, for example, talked about it in terms of the purpose such a legacy would give her actions in her present life: “(Y)ou know, you work hard and you have a nice house and [pause] you have retirement plans, and savings and things, and then you think, well I’ve not got any children to leave it all too, what’s the point?”

The difficulties of speaking

Attention to the structure of Sonya’s narrative gives a sense of the intensity and meaning of these losses for her, and to the ways in which she was unable to capture them in speech. There was no hesitation or pause for thought as she contemplated her reply; this segment of her narrative tumbled from her as a stream of anticipated losses. But as she moved through the segment her narrative stumbled on the finality of her repeated “never”, and then faltered to a stop as she spoke of its impact on her throughout her life. It is as if in identifying and speaking her list of losses to another she heard them for herself and was overwhelmed by the extent of them and the inexpressibility of them. “Suffering resists definition because it is the reality of what is not”, Frank writes (2001, p.355). For Sonya, her “the whole, whole picture”

stands in for losses that are multitudinous, incomprehensible and inexpressible; beyond symbolisation.¹⁰⁴

5.6 Triggers for grief

With most loss events people experience themselves to be grieving when moments in their daily life are marked by the absence of something or someone that was previously present; they miss them and mourn their absence. Circumstantially childless women, having no previous presence to mourn, and grieving rather for a potential to create such a presence, find their grieving is triggered by times, people, things and places that symbolise that potential for them. Family times such as Christmas, and Mothers' Day were often spoken of as particularly difficult times. Many talked about how being around pregnant women, small children and families was often unbearable for them and they avoided them where possible.

Participants' talk about their everyday lives illustrated their heightened sensitivity to these symbolic triggers, and the inevitable ubiquity of such triggers in what Meier et al describe in the epigraph to this chapter as their "management of ordinary affairs". For many women, menstruation was a regular monthly reminder of what they were grieving, and the trappings of personal care a potent symbol of their loss. Isabella described her feelings at the supermarket for example:

Oh, I'm *sick* of it! Even the way that they lay out supermarkets is really really insensitive. [Lois: how do you mean?] You go down the aisle that you've got tampons in [pause] and right next to them is nappies. It's like a constant reminder: if [pause] if you can't have a nappy you can have a tampon. (...) It's like, here we go again. And sometimes I've walked past [the tampons] and I've gone, 'I'm not buying you! I'm not buying you this month! I don't *need* you!'

Gina described a regular reminder of her childlessness at her workplace to other members in a group interview:

(T)here's a whole row of um lactation, breast feeding posters [at her workplace], and so you walk down this gauntlet and it's a kind of narrow um hallway and it's just like poster after poster after poster after poster and they, and most, a lot of them have a naked woman with a naked baby on her breast, actually on her chest, in between the breasts, and the message is 'skin on skin' you know, they love it; it's a really cool positive message. But I always find it [pause] hard (...) because, yeah, I mean everybody loves that, I mean, and I would have loved it, it [pause] and I yeah and I still mourn for that [taps on her drawing] kind of, just that, just that [pause] experience and but, and so it's like a reminder every time I walk down that corridor, and mmm. Yeah.

Gina's use of "gauntlet" and Isabella's angry response to the tampons apparently taunting her in the supermarket aisle illustrated both their intense emotions and their feeling of exclusion

¹⁰⁴ In Chapter 6 (p.181) I discuss how these women's difficulty in articulating aspects of their experience might be related to Ettinger's theory of the matrixial.

from a world that is “insensitive” to or unaware of their emotional distress. Gina’s conflict was clear: “everybody loves” the message the posters gave, and she too “would have loved it”, but, because she is excluded from participation in that experience, she is not part of “everybody” and the reminder gives her pain rather than the positive pleasurable message that she presumes others in her social world have. Small, apparently impersonal but very powerful symbols like these served as constant triggers to participants’ grieving. Her image of a narrow hallway in which she is unable to distance herself physically from these repeated painful reminders (“poster after poster after poster”) evokes a sense of a series of blows that she feels forced to endure each time she takes that corridor.

The continuum of loss/hope that these women discuss moving through in their 30s and early 40s however also meant that these possible triggers for some older women could also be things that younger participants saw as symbols in which they took pleasure, because they represented the possibility of mothering in the future. While many women talked about avoiding being around babies and children for example, others spoke of their delight in doing this. Similarly the ‘trappings’ of maternity were often discussed. Thomson (2007, p.3) has described material objects such as baby clothes, shoes, and toys as “important memory texts within which time, emotion and history are condensed”. It seems for many of these women they represented rather a kind of future text, in which their hopes and fantasies of maternity were condensed. Younger women spoke of buying these for themselves and the child they still hoped to have. For these circumstantially childless women, such items, bought or passed on from family members and carefully ‘put aside’, were powerful materializations of their maternal fantasies and symbols of their hope of them becoming embodied reality.

Such symbols of a possible future carried with them disappointment and pain when that hoped-for future was not realized. Sonya, for example, said that giving away the clothes she had bought for imagined babies “really hit home”. In the following segment her halting speech was an indicator of the emotional impact that still suffused the experience, even in the retelling of the event some years later.¹⁰⁵

Sonya: I had them [the baby clothes] out to [pause] you know [pause] it was [pause] you know [pause] yeah. I guess the, the feelings you have when you [pause] bought them, you know and you just imagined [pause] and then getting to the point that that didn’t, yeah [stop]

¹⁰⁵ Thomson *et al.* (2011, p.197) write that “the increased commercialization of motherhood can be seen as a key change in the way motherhood is lived and experienced in contemporary times”. Perhaps for these women, buying ‘things’ is an “illusion” in the sense that Winnicott spoke of; an unconscious attempt to create a reality by materialising their fantasies (See Chapter 2, p.30).

(...)

Lois: What do you think it represents?

Sonya: Hope.

The experience of grieving

While grieving is twinned with sadness in popular understanding, a psychoanalytic perspective on mourning recognizes that a much broader range of emotional experience is involved and this is indicated in the interview transcripts and drawings. Tangled with their sadness, participants talked of incidents in which painful feelings of rage, envy, shame, guilt and hatred were also triggered. Many participants spoke of an enormous anger at their sense of injustice that life had turned out as it had for them. Kate, for example, talked about how these emotions were tied together for her:

(T)hat absolute grief of being really angry at the world, that it seems so unfair (...) [I felt] really ripped off, that life was pretty unfair. It was horrible, I remember it was really, really horrible. And thinking I was never ever going to get over it. That I was just going to be [pause] I was going to be [pause] yeah that was the hardest thing, thinking, 'if I don't have kids, I'm going to be *this* sad for the rest of my life!'

For many women the anger was at times triggered by and focused on other women who *were* pregnant or had children. Speaking about the years in her early/mid 30s for example Connie said:

It was hard because it turned out to be a time when my whole social circle was starting to have families. And so all my girlfriends started families and it was this terrible time of hearing again that one of them was pregnant and, yeah it was just very painful and it was really difficult to feel happy for them, which I felt bad about because of course for them it was great and they were in the right circumstances to have a baby. But it did bother me a lot. I'll never forget one birthday party that I had—my own birthday—and it was outside in the garden and one of my girlfriends there, she told us that she was pregnant, and it just ruined my whole birthday party. She wouldn't have known it was so sensitive to me at the time, and when I tried to talk about it later on I felt that it wasn't working—she was so full of herself she felt that I was very selfish.

Craib (1994, p.18) noted that the complex psychological processes of mourning involve “feelings that might not be readily associated with it” such as “jealousy, triumphalism, a desire to punish”. Connie was envious of her friend's pregnancy, and ashamed of feeling this way. Her choice of the term “full of herself” to describe her friend is interesting, evoking as it does the fullness of a pregnant woman. Along with this envy is a sense that an announcement of a pregnancy trumped Connie's birthday celebrations; a time when she might reasonably expect to take pleasure in being the focus of attention in her social group.

5.7 'Choice', and the right to grieve

Individual people—men and women—are by definition engaged in at least two interlocking forms of emotional work: the 'internal' work of coping with contradiction, conflict and ambivalence and the 'external' work of reconciling what goes on inside with what one is supposed or allowed to feel.

(Craib 1995, p.155)

Connie's shame is about the feelings of envy she is not "supposed" to feel. An individual grieves both as an individual and as a member of a social system (Brabant 2002). Craib's words speak to the ways in which people's emotions are a set of complex responses, in which the social and the psychological are inextricably interwoven and mutually structured, and their social worlds shape the experience and expression of grieving they do. A sense that their experience and the grieving that was part of it was unrecognized and illicit in some way, because of the choices these women had made, was apparent across the research materials. Their narratives were full of evidence of the 'internal' and 'external' "emotional work" that Craib spoke of, and in their stories it is possible to see some of the features that lie underneath the construction of normative rules that define what they are "supposed or allowed to feel".

'Disenfranchised grief'

Doka's (1989, 2002) concept of 'disenfranchised grief' is useful in conceptualizing the ways in which the social regulation of grief shapes the grieving of circumstantially childless women. Doka argues that some grief, some losses, and some grieverers are stigmatized, minimized or rendered invisible because they fall outside of a set of normative boundaries. Extending this idea, Corr (2002, p.41) suggests that the normative order establishes "who have a right to experience and express their reactions (to significant losses), and who can expect to have their losses and their subsequent reactions and responses to those losses acknowledged and supported by society".

There are a number of ways in which the participants in this study appear to fall outside the set of people who are socially permitted to grieve. The most obvious relates to the type of loss they are dealing with. Participants drew on available discourses to frame and make sense of their experience and, since they are not related to a bereavement, for the most part these women's experience do not fit with popular understandings of loss, and hence of grieving. Irene and Isabella's comments (section 5.2) illustrate this difficulty, and I suggest that this is one of the key reasons that many participants were tentative in naming their experience as grief. Other participants who were trained as counsellors or psychotherapists had been exposed to a broader alternative discourse of loss and grieving, and were much more

confident in framing their experiences of loss as ‘grief’, both in their conversation with me, and to themselves. Kate, for example, is a counsellor:

I don’t think it’s seen as an OK grief to have, or there’s things about: oh well, if you’d really wanted kids you would have settled down by now, and it’s not [pause] you know? I’m not just going to settle down with any old person you know. I do, I think it’s not recognized, and I think that my church, when I was going through a real grieving thing I used to sit there feeling quite angry because they used to talk about family and sure, I’ve got my own family but they were meaning in the sense of your own kids, and I used to feel like screaming, ‘what about the rest of us who don’t have kids here!’

‘Chronic Sorrow’

In his discussion of ‘suffering’ Frank (2001, p.355) wrote, “(a)t the core of suffering is the sense that something is irreparably wrong with our lives, and wrong is the negation of what could have been right”. This is the essence of Susan Roos’ (2002) concept of ‘Chronic Sorrow’, a particular form of disenfranchised grief that provides a significant exception to the absence of study around non-death losses, and encompasses ‘living losses’ such as those associated with a deteriorating condition such as dementia or Muscular Dystrophy. In some ways there are parallels between these losses and those associated with the experience of circumstantial childlessness. Those losses too are not marked by a fixed loss event that pins grief to a particular point with a ‘before’ and ‘after’ the loss occurred, but rather unfold as time passes and the condition worsens.¹⁰⁶ Roos, developing a concept introduced in the 1960s within the context of disability (Olshansky 1962), defined ‘chronic sorrow’ as:

A set of pervasive, profound, continuing, and recurring grief responses resulting from a significant loss or absence of crucial aspects of oneself (self-loss) or another living person (other-loss) to whom there is a deep attachment (...) The essence of chronic sorrow is a painful discrepancy between what is perceived as reality and what continues to be dreamed of.

(Roos 2002, p.26)

It could be argued that the loss or absence of “the sense of myself as a mother” is felt by many circumstantially childless women to be a “crucial aspect” of themselves in this way. In addition, Roos describes fantasy—“what could have been or should have been (and maybe will be, after all)” —as being central to ‘chronic sorrow’. The parallels with the role of fantasy in circumstantial childlessness are clear in her description of its part in ‘chronic sorrow’: “(a)ctivation of the fantasy intensifies painful emotions, as the disparity between the fantasy and current living reality can be cruel and wounding” (2002, p.27). She compares these losses with death and with other non-death losses such as divorce “where there is an end point or

¹⁰⁶ For some people a diagnosis creates an artificial point at which the loss ‘happens’ but other losses associated with the condition continue to accrue after that time.

finality” and writes that ‘chronic sorrow’ is different because it is about “living with the realization of a loss that cannot be removed and that continually requires energy for adaptations” (2002, p.27).

In spite of these parallels with the grieving circumstantially childless women do I am reluctant to conceptualize it as ‘chronic sorrow’. Roos is wary of the concept being “overly inclusive” because of the danger of its losing its “meaning and utility”, and is anxious to prevent its “over-expansion” (2002, p.45) beyond the field of disability. In its strong focus on the part that trauma plays—in the birth of a child with a disability, or acquisition of one, or an accident that brings this about in the case of other-loss for example—it is not a good ‘fit’ for circumstantial childlessness. Most germane is that, unlike the losses in circumstances associated with disability that Roos documents, circumstantial childlessness is not a pathological condition.¹⁰⁷ Women who experience it rightly resist a framing of their bodies or their lives as being disabled, flawed, inadequate, or in some way unhealthy.

The complexities of ‘choice’

The part that agency and ‘choice’ plays in the phenomenon of circumstantial childlessness is an important further point of difference, since ‘chronic sorrow’ is a choiceless loss, whereas the losses of circumstantial childlessness are in part an outcome of the choices women have made, and this impacts their experience of mourning them.

A further ‘infringement’ of social laws of grieving that renders these women’s right to mourn illegitimate draws on the idea that there is a natural ‘logic’ to grief; that grieving people are necessarily passive victims of circumstance, and those who have played a part in bringing about loss in their lives are by inference not eligible for support from others (and perhaps from themselves). Maree implied this when she said, “women are not allowed to feel any loss about it, because they’ve made that happen that way”. As a consequence of this logic, the grief of circumstantially childless women is further disenfranchised because of the complexities of agency, ‘choice’ and reproductive decision-making in contemporary women’s lives; because of what they have “made happen”.

I use apostrophes around the word ‘choice’ to highlight that from a psychosocial perspective the whole notion of ‘choice’ as it is popularly understood is compromised. Chodorow (1986, p. 197) wrote, “(p)sychoanalysis radically undermines notions about autonomy, individual

¹⁰⁷ Women who go on to develop ‘age-related infertility’ might be understood to have a pathological condition in the medical sense of that word, but the phenomenon itself is not inherently pathological in either the medical or the popular sense, as the conditions associated with disability are.

choice, will, responsibility, and rationality, showing that we do not control our own lives in the most fundamental sense”. Along with conscious decision-making, complex unconscious forces have also shaped the decisions these women have made, and the ambivalence they feel in relation to doing so. Many aspects of their reproductive decision-making are inexplicable in terms of rational choice (Salecl 2011). Theorizing from a psychoanalytic perspective about her clinical work with women for whom it is “too late” Chodorow (2003 p. 1182) noted that the task of these women is in part to recognize how their not having children was “due to their own psychic realities and the behaviors that these realities generated”. She writes:

Destructive wishes towards the woman’s own womb and her mother’s lead to behaviors that sabotage fertility and pregnancy. These wishes and behaviors meet up with an unconscious belief in and commitment to time standing still, and with cultural tropes and trends that obscure intrapsychic conflicts and denials about motherhood, aging, and time.

(Chodorow 2003, p.1181)

Acknowledging the cultural context in which women’s lives are embedded she noted that this unconscious sense of “time standing still” may be more likely in cultures that emphasize “youth, no aging, longer lives, later fertility, and a family life cycle that seems to have no fixed routine and to be a voluntary rather than a taken-for-granted option”.

Elsa’s interview highlighted these issues well. She spoke at length about the difficulties and complexities of her relationship with her mother, and of the “expectation” in her family culture of becoming “well educated” before she “settled down” and had a family. Talking about the time she spent in her 30s doing doctoral study she said,

I was sort of, you know, it’s like okay I’m carrying on doing my PhD. I’m doing this work, actually I could also stop doing my PhD and focus on the other bit [finding a partner and having a child]. But then it’s like I don’t want to do that because I’m not going to be happy if I don’t fulfill this and I need to do what makes me happy but, it’s sort of like but I still didn’t want to give up on [pause] on what I always wanted to do in having kids and settle down with a family, yeah.

Elsa was one of many women who appeared to have an “unconscious belief in (...) time standing still”, and who told me they always thought there would be plenty of time to have children in the future. It was only in retrospect that she realized that making the choice to complete a PhD limited other choices she might have made. In this segment she drew on a discourse of the necessity of ‘fulfilling’ herself in order to be happy, and did not appear to consider that such fulfillment might be found in having children. Rather she saw the idea of “having kids” and ‘settling down’ as something a woman does *after* she has fulfilled herself in other ways.

Like Elsa, other participants in this study understood themselves to have made active choices about prioritizing travel, education, career and other experiences, about taking up relationships with partners who are unwilling or unable to have a child, and about terminating unplanned pregnancies earlier in their lives. The ‘choices’ they made are based on competing discourses about what it is to be a successful, happy, autonomous woman. They do not account for the contradictions, complexities and realities of women’s lives. Many women struggled with conflicts inherent in taking personal responsibility for their lives as Elsa did, and a sense of injustice that the complexities of their decisions and the grief inherent in opportunities lost are not acknowledged socially.

Termination of pregnancy was a site in which this complex interplay of agency, time, and the ‘right’ to grieve was most clearly illustrated in several participants’ narratives. In discussing the complexities of her decision to terminate her pregnancy and its impact on her, Maree distinguished between the ‘permission’ she gave herself to grieve and her perception that “society” would judge things differently:

I had the opportunity to have a child, um, so I don’t have the right to be sad about not having children [pause] in society’s eyes, yeah. I give, I, yeah I give myself the right, privately, yeah [pause] I understand what, you know, because it seems logical looking from the outside in, um, if a woman had the opportunity to have a child and, and didn’t and then was sad about not having children that wouldn’t make much sense.

Once again Maree draws on a naturalised ‘logic’ to grieving in suggesting that she had no right to social support in her grief for the pregnancy she terminated. Lynn also talked about the difficulties of her decision-making around abortion and its impact on her talking with others about her childlessness:

I think that has made it really hard for me to talk to people about it [her childlessness]. The sort of *irony* of wanting children and having had two abortions. And the [pause] um [pause]. I mean, they’re contradictory [pause] feelings, and unless you know the detail behind it, then it’s umm [stop].

Like Maree, Lynn was anxious that her terminations were not discussed in the group interview. Even in that setting, she was concerned that she would be judged, and although a significant number of women I interviewed had had an abortion in the past, she appeared to presume that she would be alone in being circumstantially childless even though she had been pregnant in the past.

Women’s particular fantasies of maternity create an additional conflict in making the decision to become a mother. On one hand women are now able to make choices about whether or not they get pregnant (or continue an unplanned pregnancy), but on the other they are confronted

with a barrage of social and personal injunctions about what it means to be a ‘good’ mother. Participants’ personal maternal fantasies were of being a particular *kind* of mother in particular circumstances. Providing the material circumstances that made it possible to do so was perceived as impossible for some participants. For Lesley (see Chapter 4, p.87) and many other participants, having a child became contingent on a set of particular conditions and circumstances, and they prioritized the *circumstances* in which they would have a child over their *capacity* to do so. On a conscious level they appeared to understand themselves simultaneously as both *not* having agency (because they were ‘unable’ to make their contingencies come about) and *having* agency (because they were making choices about what those conditions or contingencies were). These complexities of choice are not accounted for in the simple social logic of Maree’s “women are not allowed to feel any loss about it, because they’ve made that happen that way”.

5.8 Silence and isolation

The concept of ‘disenfranchised grief’ is also a useful tool in considering the painful sense of isolation that was a very strong element in the narratives of the women in this study. It was often reflected in their drawings; many featured a single figure separated from others in their social worlds by a membrane of some sort.¹⁰⁸ Both in group and individual interviews women talked about the rejection they experienced in the very places they might have expected support—family and social connections such as church for example—and of feeling “alone”, and “not being seen” in their relationships with others in these close social networks.

Kauffman (2002, p.69) argues that the social process of disenfranchisement itself creates this isolation for individuals. He writes:

A basic part of the loss inflicted by disenfranchisement is a loss of the shelter of community. Cut off in his or her grief from social recognition, the disenfranchised griever is prone to experience an underlying sense of alienation and loneliness, shame, and abandonment. The experience of being disenfranchised by a social group alienates one from that group, and it may contribute to a degeneration of the individual’s sense of being part of the social fabric.

For many participants this sense of alienation was apparent in their perception that there was no socially acknowledged space or category for their experience of circumstantial childlessness, both institutionally and within their more intimate social spheres. A vivid example of the structural invisibility of this experience is seen in official statistics in New Zealand, where no distinction is made between those who are childless by choice and those who do not have a child as a consequence of other events in their life (Boddington & Didham

¹⁰⁸ See for example Gina’s (p.95) and Julia’s (p.153) drawings.

2007). Over and again women expressed a sense of being set apart from “the whole society”. Kelly alluded to the way this lack of recognition is codified in the public spaces of official forms, saying, “(A) a lot of them ask about your family situation (...) and [sigh] I’m like [pause] I’m, I’m none of those. There’s no group that, that matches you know”.

Although there does appear to be an increasing coverage of the growing phenomenon of ‘circumstantial childlessness’ in public media, the frequency with which these women talked about their experience being unrecognized (at least as they perceived it) leads me to question how accurately this developing public narrative reflects and represents women’s own perception of their experience. I was astonished by how often participants tentatively wondered whether there might be others in a similar situation.¹⁰⁹ Frank (2010, p.2) writes that stories “give form—temporal and spatial orientation, coherence, meaning, intention, and especially boundaries—to lives that inherently lack form”. Without an expected access to stories of ‘me as a mother’, and a rejection of positioning themselves as women who have chosen to be childless, these women appeared to find there to be a limited range of public narratives of circumstantial childlessness available to them.

The warmth that quickly developed between women who were mostly strangers to one another in the group interviews created an interesting contrast that threw their usual experience of isolation into relief for me. An extract from my research journal written after one such interview highlighted this. Reflecting on the interaction between the group participants that began to develop immediately after they had shared their drawings with one another I noted:

I was aware of feeling the power shift inside myself. Suddenly I felt an outsider in a room of women who were all in a similar boat. I felt their sense of pleasure in being—for once—in a room where *their* situation was known, shared, and didn’t need to be justified. It was a very interesting reversal of how it must so often feel for them.

Self-disenfranchisement: a collusion with silence

The mourning process “requires both a mourner who can tolerate the painfulness of grief and an external world that aids and abets in that process” (Prager 2009, p.150). An important effect of the isolation I have described is the absence of the kind of support that Klein alluded to in writing that the care of those around her can ameliorate a person’s suffering at a time of loss. For the circumstantially childless women of this study this type of support was largely missing. Over and again women told me that they had not been able to talk to others. Kate, for

¹⁰⁹ The focus of articles in popular literature tends to be more on the factors that contribute to women’s childlessness (see for example Barnett 2010) than on their experience of it.

example, commented, “(b)ecause it’s so invisible I think you struggle with it so much on your own (...); you think by talking about it people are going to go ‘what?’ That they won’t get it”.

Perhaps the most serious outcome of this isolation are the constraints the women felt in seeking support and sharing their stories with others in similar circumstances. This affected the social resources they have available to them, and added to the social invisibility of their experience. Very few of the women I interviewed told me they felt able to speak to others, and then only rarely, with perhaps with one other woman. It is clear that although the phenomenon of ‘circumstantial childlessness’ might be read through a sociological framing as a public issue emerging from a particular conjunction of social, historical and economic circumstances, for these women it is primarily experienced—in a decidedly lonely way—as a very ‘private trouble’ (Wright Mills 1959).

Gina’s story illustrates this sense of isolation. When she met the man she later married, he already had children, and was unwilling to have more, creating a situation where she felt she had to choose between staying with him, or leaving and trying to find someone else with whom to have a child. She talked about the painful complexities of decision-making she struggled with in her 30s in relation to her longing to have a child saying, “(y)ou know, your calculus is choosing between this abstract scenario that might or might not work out, or this real live person that you’re in love with. There’s no discussion about what that’s really like”. In the excerpt that follows she struggled to make sense of the decision she made and the ways she understood this as constraining her ability to seek support from others in dealing with the grief she felt in not having a child:

Oh it’s complex isn’t it. Maybe I should have made this choice [to leave her husband] long ago and [pause] given that I didn’t, I don’t have any right to gripe about it now [pause]. But I didn’t want to leave him. I didn’t want to *leave* him. And that’s why I didn’t. So I mean [pause] I think the implication is: it’s my life, there’s my desires, or putative desires, so if I [pause], I made my choice and I should not feel regret or grief about it (...) [Making that choice] wipes out any avenue for complaining about it, or even talking about it really [pause]. I reckon that’s a big mechanism at work in women’s tendency to stay isolated and not discuss it. As a woman, as soon as you bring something up, you’re implicitly seeking support, emotional support. And so you have to have the [pause] right to seek that support.

Gina’s doubts here are both about her having the right to grieve (“I should not feel grief or regret about it”) and the “the right to seek support” from others. Once again it is based on a kind of grieving ‘logic’ and it represents an internalizing of the societal rules about grieving in which she is immersed. Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps (1996, pp.32-33) write that:

(s)ilencing is a product of internal and interactional forces in that a person may repress and suppress emotions and events, but these processes are linked to external circumstances, including others’ expectations and evaluations. [...] Silencing is part of the fabric of culture in that it is

critical to socializing prevailing ideologies. Assuming one's expected place entails conforming to and telling stories that reinforce social order.

The process by which those around him or her disenfranchise a person's grief may be simply one of a lack of awareness, such as might be experienced by thoughtless comments made to a woman about her being "lucky" to be childfree, but Corr (2002, p.4) writes that it may be much a more active one of "disavowal, renunciation, and rejection". Deborah, who described her relationship with her nieces and nephews as being extremely important to her, spoke of her outrage and hurt in a situation where she was offering to care for her brother's children: "He said to me [pause] get your own children, and don't steal mine". And I just [pause] I was [pause], I didn't say anything, I've never said anything to him about it". Her silence in response is indicative of the part that circumstantially childless women may themselves play in contributing to the social silence that they perceived to be surrounding this phenomenon. In the excerpt that follows Lesley suggested that an awareness of the depth of her own feelings and also of what she described as "a Pandora's box" of potentially difficult feelings that might have constrained her from talking to other circumstantially childless friends:

[I don't talk] even with close friends. Mainly just because I think I would, you know, cry a lot like I have this morning [at the interview]. And I just don't want to do that. And I actually don't know how some of my other friends have come to terms with it, and to what extent they are sitting on the same sort of emotional depth that I am.

Lesley's silence appears to originate in an effort to protect both herself and others, but ironically it has the effect of maintaining the disenfranchising of her grief and creating the invisible margin that separates her from others. Gina told a story in her individual interview—which she later repeated in the group interview—of a time when she had opened the "Pandora's Box" of childlessness with a friend. Her telling of the story in two settings, her repeated description within the story of the incident as "awful", and the response of the others in the group to it all suggested that this was understood amongst them as a powerfully cautionary tale:

I mean actually not long ago I did accidentally do that, with someone (...) and that was awful. It was just awful. Because I was on the phone with her, and I couldn't tell at first that she had started to cry, and it was *just* awful. And then she [pause] wept for a while, and she couldn't speak and I couldn't get her to [pause] say anything, and then she, and then I said, you know, 'I'd like to come over, I'm really sorry, I'd like to come over. Do you want to talk?' and she just didn't, didn't want to talk about it. So it was just like the most awful, awful [pause] thing and, you know, she's someone I really care about, and we still haven't been able to talk about it. Like I've been really gentle [pause] with her and I've tried to give her lots of space when I'm with her as well, and [pause] because she knows. She knows that I've [stop] I would love it if she'd bring it up but [pause] God, you don't want to *do* that to people.

The implications of a social silence

Making meaning of the events in one's life is both a social and a cognitive process (Neimeyer 2001). The narratives of these women affirm that talking with others about an experience of loss or grieving, or sharing it vicariously through various media, is an important part of individuals' making meaning of it for themselves (Attig, 2001). Without adequate opportunity to explore their experience with others who share it, and in social spheres more widely, these women struggled to make sense of it for themselves. There was often an eagerness to talk in the interviews and, through that talk, to engage in meaning-making about it. Lynn spoke about it in this way:

I find it quite hard to explore it, and understand it [pause]. There's times when I really could have done with some [pause] support [pause], and I, and also like I'm, you know, I know I can't be the only [pause] woman who has gone through some of the [pause] thoughts, and angst that I've been through, but you don't [pause] it's hard to read about it. Not in a kind of sophisticated [pause] intelligent way.

Lynn's comments point to this difficulty in making meaning of her life for herself, and also to the ways the invisibility of her circumstances in public discourse constrains her finding social support from others as she works through the long process of adapting to the loss of her opportunity to embody her fantasy of maternity and a child. And as Gina's story illustrated, a telling aspect of that isolation is the constraints it makes on opportunities to share and make meaning of their experience with other circumstantially childless women.

All of the women that I interviewed were clear that they did not want others' pity, because that would pathologize their lives, and nor did they want to be seen as a victim of their circumstances. Many commented that they *did* want social recognition of the phenomenon of circumstantial childlessness and of their being women who like and value children, rather than having made a deliberate choice not to be parents. In the light of this research, I suggest these many of women were looking for a social space that does not pathologize their experience and has room for their ongoing connection to their fantasies of maternity and a child—their “sense of myself as a mother”—even as they grieved for and adapted to the reality that they would not embody these in a biological child.

5.9 Julia

Julia's interviews and drawing provide a powerful case study that illustrates and further develops the key themes of this chapter. At the time of the interview she was a 48 year old *pakeha* woman who described herself as being someone whose extensive training and

experience (as a psychotherapist) had schooled her to think very closely about language. In the interviews she chose and weighed her words extremely carefully, apparently in order to give as accurate an account as she could. My sense was that Julia established a trust in me very quickly in the interview that was in part based on a presumption of a common language and set of practices and beliefs related to my being a grief counsellor and educator whose work she knew and respected. She spoke confidently and directly, and was unapologetic and apparently comfortable about her tearfulness at times throughout the interview. She was explicit about her losses and her grieving for them, and the ways in which her experience of grieving was inextricably tangled with issues of agency and the complexities of 'choice'.

As she was growing up the idea that she would have children was "definitely there" for Julia. She described herself as an "over responsible" child who "couldn't wait" to get away from the responsibility for caring for three younger siblings. Like Maree, in her 20s she felt some ambivalence about children, but by her early 30s "it really kicked in that I wanted to". Chodorow (2003) wrote that the phenomenon of circumstantial childlessness—or "too lateness" as she put it—is marked in her clinical practice by women who had a number of siblings, and whose mothers were "depressed, downtrodden, submissive, and tired from taking care of so many children" (2003, p.1190). Although it is not clear whether or not Julia perceived her mother in this way, she said her mother had "a very difficult time" having children. She speculated that her mother's two miscarriages and two stillborn babies ("basically I was surrounded by dead babies") must have had "a large effect". At the same time as wanting to have a baby, she said, "in some ways it terrified me too". She commented that her mother once said to her that she "didn't have to have children".

Embodied fantasies

In her 20s Julia twice became pregnant, and both times terminated the pregnancy. There was a marked shift in tone in her individual interview from a strong voice to a much quieter one, with crying, when she discussed these events. She spoke very tearfully of the difficulties and complexity of choice and the long-term impacts of the choices she had made. The first time, she said, "I just felt too young. I wasn't that young but I felt too young". She added,

I've often thought: what decision would I have made if that had been my only [pause] if I'd known then what I know now [small laugh], and I, I don't have an easy answer for that. I deeply regret those decisions [pause] and [pause] [crying] but I don't know if I'd do it any different. So yeah, it's, it's horrible really.

The regret around those decisions to terminate, and what she described as a "huge amount of grief" in her early 40's, came from her realisation that they had "take[n] away all these

opportunities or experiences” further on in her life (she named being a grandmother as an example). Julia’s maternal fantasies, ignited by her brief experiences of pregnancy, became strongly associated with the two “children” (her word) she had aborted, as I discuss further below.

Alienation and isolation

Talking about the triggers for her feelings of grief Julia said:

Extended family I find really hard, so any extended family functions. They’re not very often. [pause] Christmas; I have found Christmas hard. In fact I will no longer choose to have Christmas outside of my family. There was a time when I would spend it [pause] I remember spending it with some friends in New Plymouth and their young children and I suddenly looked at myself and I thought, ‘what am I doing? I’m a freak! I’m just a freak; I don’t fit in here! That’s not my family’. So [pause] um [pause]. I will not ever do that again.

The occasions Julia found hard were those that highlighted her position of divergence from the norm as an adult woman in a context in which others might judge her for this difference. Her use of the descriptor ‘freak’ suggests how powerful this perceived judgment was, and the ways in which she may have projected her own judgment of herself onto others, presuming they would be seeing her in the same way. Julia said she felt “like a failure” for not having had children.

Julia’s sense of isolation in her social worlds was the aspect she focused on in making her drawing.



Figure 5: Julia's Drawing

Julia's drawing is a vivid visual text about the perceived distance from what she described as "society" that stems from her not having had a biological child. Describing it to the group she explained she had drawn herself as an orange dot, separate from but linked in a figure-of-eight to "two friends that I have that are in a simi [stop] that are like [pause] us [the other women in the research group]; that don't have children". Spatially Julia depicted herself as alone, separated quite markedly from "society", adjacent to but still separated from her family, and most strongly linked to these two friends who also did not have children. Highlighting the sense of solidarity she felt with these two women she said, "I really, you know I really [pause] ohh um [pause] align myself with them? [pause] or [pause] they're really really important because they are like me [catch in her voice] [pause] so they're my [pause] um, sisters. Yeah". Identifying these "sisters" as being "like us" suggests that Julia identified herself as part of a minority subculture of 'circumstantially childless' women and was drawing on the research group for a "social bond between fellow sufferers (...) where a common life situation connects them as peers [who] share the same fate" (Ketoviki 2009, p.392).

Adjacent to the figure of eight and touching but not linked to it is another encapsulated oval representing her immediate family, and in another separate capsule, further away, is "everybody else in the world". She described herself as having a "difficulty" with "the rest of

the world being geared for families and children, and I just [pause] hate it". Her drawing gives a sense of the ways in which she potentially both isolated herself and was isolated by others. Her sense of alienation from others in her social world was underlined in her comment in the group that "there's this whole fantasy about my life which is so far removed from the truth of who I am".

"A constellation of circumstances": the limits of agency and complexities of 'choice' and time.

The tensions around agency, choice and grieving were very evident in Julia's interviews and drawing. In her drawing she appeared to choose colour deliberately (if initially unconsciously) and began by emphasising that she had chosen orange for herself because it is "vibrant and alive".¹¹⁰ She also used colour to link herself strongly to her childless friends in warm tones, to separate herself from the somewhat cooler tones she used for others in "society". Even though she went on to describe a situation in which she felt isolated from a lot of what she described as "society" and marginalized by the social structures around her, in her deliberate choice of colour Julia resisted an image of herself as a drab victim of her circumstances. Throughout her interviews she vehemently refused to be positioned as someone who was lacking in any way that diminished her and she made active choices about how she reflected on herself. For example, she described herself, both initially to me and within the group as "childfree". When I asked her about this she said,

I'm not *less* because I don't have children. [pause] So I've really consciously chosen to use that phrase now (...) it's not quite right [but] for my own personal process I keep reminding myself of what's possible in a childfree, rather than a childless condition.

From her position of a woman making strong active choices in her life Julia stumbled at times in discussing the complexities and contradictions of 'choice' in her life.

Lois: Have you seen yourself as making choices throughout this [process of becoming circumstantially childless]?

Julia: Not consciously, no. I mean, yes I made a conscious choice not to have two children in my 20s but I don't ever believe that I have ever said 'I'm not having children'. [pause] That's not a choice. That wasn't a choice.

Lois: It wasn't a choice?

Julia: No, that wasn't a choice.

¹¹⁰ It appears to be only in retrospect, as she described the drawing to the group, that Julia became aware of the significance of her colour choices; although she said she "chose green" to symbolize her family later in the description, at the beginning she noted that "I didn't really deliberately choose these colours I don't think".

Lois: So how would you describe what happened?

Julia: Um [pause] it was like a constellation of circumstances that didn't [pause] um [pause] allow for it to happen [quietly]. (...) And I, I was, I think I was kind of deluded in some respects. You know there's all these people round me having babies and I'm still going 'oh yeah. It will happen. One day'. Not, not really being conscious of time passing and conscious too - 'actually, if you want this you have to make it happen in some way. (...) you have to be active about it.' And I guess I wasn't. I was probably a little bit more passive, until it was maybe too late. Yeah.

Julia's repetitions ("that wasn't a choice") were explicit; she wanted to emphasize to me (and perhaps to herself) that she had not chosen to be without children, but, like Lesley, she had made choices about the circumstances in which they might come into being. Taking a passive voice ("didn't allow it happen") suggests that she continued to see herself as having limited agency over "circumstances", even though she had realised "too late" that she needed to do something about conceiving if she was to bring her maternal fantasies into embodied reality. In this respect, she seemed to be saying that finding herself without children was an outcome of her choices rather than a choice in itself (Wager 2000).

Julia appeared to relate some of her 'delusion' to her not being "conscious of time passing". Adam (1990) writes that 'clock time'—the organizational linear time frame of society, production and politics—has become so pervasive that it defines 'time' in popular understanding, but it is at odds with the cyclical, repetitious and "eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm" that Kristeva (1979, p.191) calls "women's time". As I have discussed, Chodorow's (2003) clinical work with circumstantially childless women identifies a pattern of their operating with distorted understandings of time as Julia does; her words very strongly invoke Chodorow's (2003, p.1191) notion of "time standing still". Chodorow writes (2003, p.1196) that a "meshing of women's time with a culture that denies biological aging and implies that all things are possible" is amongst the cultural tropes and social trends that contribute to the phenomenon of circumstantial childless.

Julia's narrative illustrates this tendency. She described a "very painful process" of realizing that it was probably too late for her have children in her late 30s and early 40s, and commented that it was the onset of menopause that finally convinced her it was "too late" ("I remember thinking, 'it's not over until then! It's really not over until then'"), and, even when her periods had ended, she experienced "an element of denial" as she thought "people get pregnant in menopause! It could still happen!"

Her choice of the word "deluded", however, suggested that she blamed herself in some ways for her predicament. The question of her agency in the choices she made around the terminations was very difficult for Julia to articulate. When I asked her how she would

“account for the way that life has turned out” she came back to these terminations, and the process of adaptation she has worked through as she has tried to come to terms with them:

Well, I’ve talked [stop] yeah [stop] I sup. [stop] in a psy.[stop] it’s ohhh [stop] I, I have a very clear understanding now of, of why I cho [stop] didn’t have the capacity to choose, like it just didn’t feel right. I in some sense just didn’t have the capacity, and I get that. Um [long pause] I suppose there has been [pause] has been [stop] has, has, there has had to be a process of forgiveness, because I had the opportunities to do it, so I’ve had to go through that, and one of the many meanings is that love takes many forms and being an aunt is one of those forms. At another level, it is like maybe these spirits do choose and so [pause] that was their time and it wasn’t meant to be that they could fully incarnate. They could only get that far. Whatever that means; I don’t know what that means, but that’s kind of like their soul journey.

Julia’s perception of her agency shifted around in this segment. Within the first two sentences she began to say “chose”, which implies a positive agency, changed it to frame it in developmental terms as a “capacity” to choose (she “felt too young”), and then abated this to a “sense” in which she did not yet have this capacity. Her understanding of the ‘choices’ she made thus moved from an active choice to have the terminations to a less active stance; something of an incapacity to choose to have the children that would be the product of the pregnancies. Above all throughout her interviews Julia was adamant that she did not want to be pitied; to be seen as a hapless victim of circumstances, or as someone who could not manage her own life.

This created a tension whereby she wanted to see herself—and be seen—as an agential feminist subject, and yet there were limits to her agency.¹¹¹ She had found a number of ways to resolve this tension. Her choice of the word “forgiveness” suggests that part of that resolution was an acknowledgement to herself that in some ways she did have agency about the choices she made. Perhaps she understood being a loving aunt as another way of embodying love in the world as a redemption of sorts for her. On “another level” she explored the possibility that the choice that was made shifted in part from her to the “spirits” of the “children” that were aborted.

These complexities of choice for Julia were highlighted in a segment in which she talked about a conversation she had with a child about her not having children. A number of participants talked about the advice they would give to a girl or younger woman. I understand it to be both a sense of sharing painfully gained wisdom, and also a conversation in fantasy with a younger version of themselves.

(C)hildren will ask me as well [whether she has children]. You know children are so funny, I can’t remember who it was, this one child: ‘Do you have any children?’ ‘No.’ ‘Why not?’ [laughs] ‘Cos

¹¹¹ Julia identified herself as a feminist elsewhere in the interview.

I don't like them!'[laughs] I didn't say that but [pause] I can't remember what I said. I think it was a girl, it might have been a girl. I think I said 'because I've chosen not to' and they were like 'oh my goodness, it's a choice?' Because I think I wanted to [pause] plant that seed, that there is a choice, even though it's not been what I call an active choice in my life; it's more of a kind of a passive choice. I don't like hearing myself say that, but it's probably the closest to the truth.

Julia begins by apparently 'joking' with the child that she didn't like children. The segment comes after an earlier one in which she talked about how she "live[d] in terror of my clients asking me 'do you have children?'" , so it might be assumed that the joke is about how much she disliked being asked, and in fantasy retaliated by hitting back at the child. The section that follows ("I can't remember what I said. I think it was a girl, it might have been a girl. I think I said 'because I've chosen not to' and they were like 'oh my goodness, it's a choice?'") also has a similar ring of fantasy to it, as if this is the conversation Julia would *like* to have had with a girl child, rather than a recollection of the one she did in fact have. There is a tension here for Julia. Like her mother, she was keen to make it clear to a future generation of women that there is a choice about whether or not to have children; that becoming a mother is not a "gender fate" (Miller 2005), even though, for her, it was a "passive" rather than an "active choice" not to do so, and one that she had painful regrets about.¹¹²

Claiming 'mother', and claiming loss

As part of the resolution of the tension between grief and agency Julia chose to actively remember the two "children" she had aborted in her 20s, and in doing so to claim her status as a mother, and to 'do mothering' in relation to them. Some twenty years after terminating the pregnancies and following the advice of a Maori healer with whom she was studying, Julia chose to go "up into the mountains" of the South Island of New Zealand, which was her childhood family home:

I collected all these little *taonga*¹¹³ treasures for them and I did a ritual. [...] So in that process I really claimed being a mother, and I put them to rest. So, I know, I know where they are and whenever I drive through [that area] I [pause] talk to them. [crying] So even though that's a little bit like [foof – forced exhaling sound signifying something hard to do] I've, I've, I've also *done*

¹¹² Key to Julia's understanding of herself is the modernist notion that individuals have choice and can exercise agency in this way. Social theorists such as Giddens and Foucault have in different ways problematised simplistic binaries of choice/agency and active/passive from a sociological perspective. This perspective emphasizes the ways in which individuals exist in a social context that is suffused with discourses of agency, and yet this agency is an imaginary; a product of ideas about it and the ways they circulate and are embedded in our social worlds.

¹¹³ A Maori word which means 'treasure', either in the tangible sense—such a family or cultural heirloom—or intangible sense such as 'water' or 'the land'. Children (*tamariki*) are *taonga*.

[pause] um what I think a mother should do, yeah, which is to [pause] take care of them. [very softly, and tears]¹¹⁴

Lois: So there is a sense in which you don't have children but you are a mother?

Julia: Yeah. Yeah. And I, I'm not very visible with that though. Yeah, I haven't yet [pause] had the courage to do [talk about] that.

Julia began this section in a very clear strong voice that faltered and became softer and tearful at the point where she said she knows where her "children" are and she talks to them. Her change in tone marked the shift from a factual narrative of the event to her emotional response to her ongoing connections to those children when she is close to the place that marked the place of the ritual. It suggests that this place had the symbolic meaning of a grave for her; it is where she remembered her "children" and their embodied existence, and marked her ongoing connection to them.

"I've also done what I think a mother should do, yeah, which is to take care of them" was said very quietly.¹¹⁵ Was this because she was at this point crying, and tears are intimate? Her apparent lack of discomfort about her tears elsewhere suggested otherwise to me; I read her quietness rather as hesitation. Though her use of "yeah" in the middle of the sentence reinforced Julia's affirmation of her belief in the truth of what she was saying, her words made real in the social sphere (through my witnessing them), her claim that in some way she *is* a mother, in the same way that my use of Deborah's fantasy children's names made them 'real' for her. Julia's quietness suggests her concern that her claim to the *name* of 'mother' and the *doing* of mothering are not socially sanctioned, at least in the *pakeha* world. This was confirmed in her next sentence when she said she was "not very visible" with this sense of her being a mother; it would take "courage" to talk about herself in that way.

When she said "claimed being a mother" and "I put them to rest" Julia did so with an upward inflection to "mother" and "rest". Although it was a statement, it was also almost a question. It could be that she worried that I (representing the rest of the *pakeha* social world) would ridicule or judge her claim, or that part of her (as a *pakeha* woman herself) to some degree questioned her own claims.

¹¹⁴ Julia is a psychotherapist. It is not uncommon for New Zealanders of European origin who work as health professionals to undertake training in traditional Maori healing practices as part of their professional development. These practices are grounded in a Maori ontology in which the dead are understood to hold an ongoing and important part of the lives of the living. Julia explained that a ritual such as this would usually be done on a *marae* (a communal sacred space that serves religious and social purposes) or a family plot, reinforcing the idea that symbolically, the place Julia chose for this ritual for her "children" was similar to a grave.

¹¹⁵ Other bereaved mothers whose children were stillborn have told me that they felt that washing, dressing and burying them was the last thing they could do to care for their infants (Tonkin 1998).

It seems that for Julia, and for some other women whose children were briefly embodied and were aborted or miscarried, that those children who died acted as a kind of container for her ongoing maternal fantasies and for her grief:

As I've got older I've always thought about the two children that I didn't have, and wondered what they would look like, and what they would be doing. And I notice myself attracted to same age children; I think 'oh they'd be this age now'. And I think that's really interesting. It's like, it's like [pause] they *have* grown up with me. I'm not—I love babies but I'm not [stop]; I'm thinking now I'd have children in their 20s and it's like 'oh that would be cool'.

Her words suggest that for some women the present absence of their fantasy child(ren) and maternal subjectivity may be something that is not abandoned with time as the opportunity to embody it wanes with their fertility, but rather continues to be present in their psychic life, and to age with them. In this way Julia's fantasy life has kept in step with her contemporaries who did have embodied children who are now young adults. Julia's loss is both of her potential to experience her relationship with them in an embodied form, and to have the social world around her acknowledge and validate that relationship.

In another sense though, her loss is also of those two children, who *were* very briefly embodied. Like Connie, Julia had formed a tentative belief that her children might yet be born, in another life. She told me:

I remember early on someone saying to me, you know, maybe children, you know as spirits choose their own time. [pause] I remember when I first heard that I thought 'what a load of shit. What a load of shit!' [very softly] I wasn't ready to hear that. Over the years [pause] I was really angry because it felt like that person didn't even begin to understand (...) and over time I've come to [pause] I don't know, um do I believe that now? [pause] I suppose I do to some degree. Yeah. (...) It's like that was, that was enough, that was, that was all there was at that moment. They might come back. They might come back. Yeah.

Julia described this belief as a "comfort strategy", and her repetitions of "they might come back" underlined the importance of it for her. It is as if she tested the reality of the statement by saying it out loud, and found herself able to affirm her own claim. Her beliefs had shifted over time to accommodate the possibility that those two children might yet be restored to her, and in doing so, her grieving for her fantasy children and fantasy of maternity was eased.

5.10 Concluding discussion

The phenomenon of circumstantial childlessness offers an opportunity to expand the parameters of conceptualizations of loss and grieving. These research materials clearly illustrate that a sense of loss and its associated grief is a signature feature of almost all of these women's experiences, yet those experiences are incompatible with both popular and

theoretical understandings of grieving in important ways. I have highlighted a number of ways the kinds of grieving these women do might be contrasted with the dominant temporal and material assumptions about the process of grieving. In this final section I summarize these differences, and argue that the grief they experience can only be accounted for if loss and mourning is framed differently.

Temporal issues

There is no fixed ‘loss event’ associated with this experience, but rather a continuum of potential losses experienced concurrently with a gradual process of accommodation to the reality of their finality. Klein (1940/1986, p.147) reiterated Freud (1917) in writing that the testing of reality is “an essential part of the work of mourning”. This testing is the painful and repeated encounter with the realization that the loss has occurred. In the experience of circumstantial childlessness these encounters happen over a long period of several years, but for much of that time, the loss is a threat, rather than a current reality. Although there is no question that the pain of this grieving is very intense for many women, it is often ameliorated by this way in which it is only in retrospect that its finality is apprehended.

At the same time however, unlike a death or otherwise fixed event, this same temporal open-endedness can have the effect of prolonging grieving. Media stories of women who distort “women’s time” (Kristeva 1979, p.191) by extending the limits of their childbearing capacities through the use of technologies such as donor eggs or surrogacy can stretch this still further, even if such technologies are financially out of reach for most women. For circumstantially childless women, the reality of their loss shifts because it is indexed both to their waning fertility and to their social circumstances. There is, as Gina put it “always a little hope that he would change his mind or that something would happen. [pause] Some other thing can happen, you know?” The concept of ‘chronic sorrow’ addresses losses that have no endpoint in this way, but it is a poor fit for circumstantial childlessness in other respects, most notably because it has the potential to pathologize women’s experience. The ‘chronic sorrow’ concept also does not address the part choice plays in these women’s childlessness.

Material issues

Unlike other loss events, in circumstantial childlessness there is no material loss that once existed and now does not. These losses are not material ones but rather the loss of the potential to embody a fantasy of maternity and a child; a fantasy that I have argued holds a unique and powerful position in many women’s lives. From a matrixial perspective this is the

loss of the potential to re-experience, this time as a biological mother-to-be (where formerly it was as a child-in-becoming), the matrixial experience of pregnancy. Circumstantially childless women experience what Frank (2001, p.355) has described as “the absence of what we fear will never be”. Rather than the loss of something that *was* and is no more, it is the loss of future potential, of something that might have been. It holds the potency of all that that “something” means to each individual woman, including the relationship to a fantasy child.

It might be argued that *all* loss is both a loss of the past as well as of the future in this way; that individuals fantasise a future with someone they love, and grieve for that future when it is no longer possible. In that case, however, if Freud and Klein are correct about the importance of ‘reality testing’ in working through the process of mourning, grieving the loss of someone who has died is more productive because the future for which they mourn is indexed to a past reality that is fixed. People might wonder, “what would he have been like at 90?” or “we might have done this when she was old enough”, but these thoughts are linked to an embodied relationship that they have once known. For circumstantially childless women, their reflections on what is ‘lost’ are linked to fantasy, and fantasy is unlimited; unchecked by reality.

As I have suggested, in the case of termination of pregnancy these boundaries between fantasy and embodiment become blurred, because there *has* been a material loss. Gina hinted at this when she spoke of the difficulties of grieving for the “potential” of the “child” she had aborted:

Well in my case there *was* a child. Nobody can ever say whether it was right or wrong, that I terminated that pregnancy but there was a child and there is a real loss there. There is a *person* there, really, or a potential. And I did, from time to time I’d think about it and it’s that hopelessness of ever knowing what that person would have been like, you know. It’s just *hopeless*. So, you tell your brain to just [pause] shut up. There’s *absolutely* no point pursuing it.

Gina’s experience, and, it seems, Maree and Julia’s, is that the child she aborted was potentially a person. All three of these women were explicit in their interviews about their support for a woman’s right to choose to terminate a pregnancy.¹¹⁶

Issues of agency and choice

Participants’ experiences of grief and of mourning the loss of their potential to embody their fantasies of maternity are further tangled with the complexity inherent in issues of agency and

¹¹⁶ The issue of the possibility of a sense of loss and potentially disenfranchised grief that women (and men) may experience after the termination of a pregnancy is a separate topic, but one that these research materials suggest has particular salience for women who go on to become circumstantially childless.

ideologies of choice. In Western societies loss is dominantly cast as unfavourable and grieving as passive in the sense that a grieving person is positioned as a victim of his or her circumstances; as someone something has happened *to*, and that others might perhaps pity. This understanding positions the experience of loss and grieving in opposition to an active agentic stance in life.¹¹⁷ As these women's narratives illustrate, a woman who sees herself as taking such a stance may resist the idea that she is grieving, and may question the legitimacy of her own grief.

It follows that women may not think of or talk about their experience in terms of loss, and their response in terms of grief, for a range of reasons. Firstly, they may reject the notion of loss and subsequent grief because to do so positions them as victims of their circumstances rather than as agentic selves making active choices in their lives. Secondly they may not see themselves as having 'valid' loss in the way that women who have always been biologically infertile do, or they may not conceptualize it as a loss since their loss is disenfranchised—that is it is not acknowledged or not validated as such by others—and perhaps self-disenfranchised, if they understand themselves to be people who are living with the fruits of their previous life choices. Alternatively, women may make active choices about how they deal with the losses of this form of childlessness. Julia's "ritual" is an example of this, and I discuss these actions more in the following chapter.

Pushing the limits of 'loss' and 'mourning'

The psychoanalytic models of mourning I have drawn on are useful in their exploration of the early roots of the process of mourning and the ways these continue to impact on adults' lives in later experiences of loss, but I consider their spirit to have been altered in the years since they were developed. The sense in which the capacity to mourn is understood to be a developmental achievement that is difficult but achievable for the baby—as Klein and Winnicott proposed—is underplayed in contemporary understandings. Instead, a change in focus to framing mourning psychologically as 'healthy' and 'normal' or 'pathological', has shifted understandings of responses to loss. Grieving is usually conceived as recovery (or as failure to do so); like an illness in which one is somehow set aside from 'real' life, and through which one must work in order to return to 'normal' functioning.

If circumstantially childlessness women's grieving is not to be pathologized, a conceptualization of loss and mourning must move out of its framing within a health and

¹¹⁷ Attig's (1996, 2001) concept of 'active grief' may appear to contradict this, but it is also premised on the notion that loss is usually choiceless, even though an individual's response to it need not be.

illness metaphor to take account of the responses to experiences that are both distressing and also an expected part of human existence. Such a framing is not in conflict with an acknowledgement of an often painful and difficult suffering that is implicit in these responses. In his critique of some ‘therapeutic’ responses to the inevitable difficulties and losses of life Craib (1994, p.12) wrote:

Changes in the way we live in the modern world produce a set of difficulties to which we respond by denying the difficult, painful adjustments that we have to make, attempting to transform painful experiences of loss into a creative experience, as if the loss could be shrugged off. The psychoanalytic theory of mourning has lost its original depth (...) Mourning itself has been increasingly pathologised.

Craib argued for a recognition of the importance of the “disappointment” these difficulties create in individuals’ lives, and for the part psychoanalytic psychotherapy can play in making it possible for people to “learn how to suffer” (1994, p.194). Although I think “disappointment” is too gentle a word to capture their painful essence, Craib’s emphasis on their value and inevitability is helpful. Living inevitably involves “difficulties”; encountering aspects of life that do not turn out as expected or planned, and individuals grieve for the possibilities for living that are no more. This grieving is not pathological, and it does not make them ‘victims’ of these circumstances. In this chapter I have focused on the experience of these difficulties. I turn now to the “difficult, painful adjustments” that these negotiations often entail for circumstantially childless women.

Chapter 6: Being ‘maternal’

6.1 Introduction: “What remains?”

(A)s soon as the question “What is lost” is posed, it invariably slips into the question “What remains?” That is, loss is inseparable from what remains, for what is lost is known only by what remains of it, by how these remains are produced, read, and sustained.

Eng & Kazanjian (2003, p.2)

In the previous chapters I have argued that their narratives suggest that many of the circumstantially childless women in this study appear to have a “sense of myself as a mother”; a fantasy of themselves as mothers in relation to a child or children that has both conscious and unconscious dimensions. I have theorized that these fantasies are a product of the mutual overlapping of their unique psycho-biography and the social worlds in which they have developed as children and adults. Within an overarching object relations approach I have drawn on theoretical resources of both intersubjective processes in individuals’ relationships with others after birth, and trans-subjective processes before it, to consider the origins of this fantasy.

In chapter 2 I used the visual metaphor of negative space as a way of conceptualizing the importance of the meaning-making presence that fills the space of apparent absence in these circumstantially childless women’s lives. Eng and Kazanjian’s question in the epigram operates on the same logic of this metaphor in implying that what is lost and what is left *after* loss are integral to one another. I have suggested that for these circumstantially childless women, “what is lost?” is their potential to embody their fantasy of themselves as a mother in relation to a child or children.

In this chapter I consider the question of “what remains” and the ways in which those remains are “produced, read and sustained”. My interest is in what became of these women’s fantasies of maternity and a child, as time passed and their opportunity to embody them through the birth of a biological child faded. I wondered what processes of adapting to this loss women engaged in, and what the limits and possibilities of these processes might be for them. As their fertility waned, and the loss of the potential to embody these fantasies increasingly became their lived reality for many of these participants, it might have been expected that those fantasies would simply peter out, as a potential subjectivity that they had not taken up and was now unavailable to them. That is not what these narratives and drawings

indicate; as I will illustrate, these fantasies appeared to continue in some way. In this chapter I consider why, and in what ways, this happened.

In my introductory chapter I used an extract from Deborah's interview where she talked about her "sense of herself as a mother" to illustrate the starting points for this project. I asked how I might make theoretical sense of this idea in the context of feminist analysis in which biological or religious discourses of the 'natural' function of women are not dominant in feminist theory. By way of introduction to the central themes of this chapter, I return to that extract, and begin by contextualizing it a little more than I did previously.

Revisiting Deborah's 'sense of myself as a mother'

The primary reason Deborah gave for the decision she and her husband made not to have a child was related to her older sister, whom she described as having "complex disability". She spoke of her perception of the rising risk of having a child with disability because, having met in their early 30s, she and her husband were both in their mid 30s by the time they came to make the decision about children.¹¹⁸ Her concerns were twofold: having been a carer for her sister throughout her childhood, she felt that she "could not do that again" if they had a child with a disability, and secondly, she and her husband did not feel comfortable with antenatal testing for disability and the possibility of abortion. After reading her interview transcript she emailed me because she wanted to clarify this point for me: "On the one hand we acknowledged we couldn't cope with caring for a child with disability and on the other hand we did not feel able to deny a child life (once that life had begun) for failing to be our view of 'perfect'". After some time of "fence-sitting", they decided not to try to have a child.

Deborah's response in the extract below was prompted by a question about why this decision not to have children that she and her husband made was difficult for her. Although I quoted a section of this extract in my introduction to the thesis I include the entire piece here again for ease of reading it in context:

"[It was] incredibly difficult. And is still difficult. (...) It was difficult because [pause] um [pause] I think it was difficult because [pause], I think it was difficult because [long pause] I had never [pause], and in a way still haven't, um, relinquished a, sort of [pause] sense of myself as a mother [trembling, quiet voice, crying]. Um [pause], [it's] very hard to describe but, um [pause] I guess [pause] you know, for example, in my job at the, in my job at the moment as [position], one of the things that I do, um, as part of my job, and I love, is mentoring of, and supervision of [a set of people]. And [pause] in some ways, some of the life skills, personal skills that I apply in those

¹¹⁸ A concern about the perceived risk of having a child with disabilities because of their older age was a stated concern of eight of these participants, and may have been for others. This anxiety was often framed in terms of responsibility. Natalie, for example, said "I probably feel that sort of beyond forty I would consider it reasonably irresponsible, just because of what I know, to have a child".

relationships—I mean these are not parental relationships [laughs], it's entirely inappropriate that they should be—um, and yet there are some skills, some attributes of myself, that I *use* in those relationships, um, or make available in those relationships, that would also be available and used within a mothering, or a parenting type of relationship. And [pause] I think that, um [pause] and strangely, you know, whether it's in a relationship with a pet [laughs], or a relationship with a spouse, or a relationship with a sibling, or a relationship with a niece or nephew, [...] somehow there are elements of myself, in each of those relationships that [pause] that are, that parts of those things are a sort of a parenting, nurturing sort of part of me. And, so I guess I've never relinquished the idea of myself as a [pause] parent, nurturer, um, type of person. And, so I think it's, it's [pause] um, one of the struggles I've had with not having my own biological children, is there hasn't [pause] on the one hand that's the obvious outlet for those parts of me, um, and I don't have that, and yet I still see places, relationships, um, where those, those parts of me exist, and are used, and are valued, and so on. And so it's a tension, I think, between, you know, if you're not a *mother*—you don't have biological children, then you're not maternal, or you're not nurturing, or you're not something”.

Clearly Deborah's maternal fantasies had not disappeared with the decision she and her husband had made not to have children, nor in the years since it was made. Deborah is a highly articulate woman, whose professional career has trained her to be skilled in using language to express complex ideas. These skills were demonstrated throughout her interview, where she spoke almost entirely with a notable clarity and fluidity, choosing her words very carefully. Her modifications, points of laughter, and the faltering and grammatical fumble she made in this section of her interview were a significant exception to her clarity of style in this interview, and provide useful points for analysis in themselves. A psychosocial analysis takes account of both what is said and what is *not* said, of the tone of speaking, and of what might be indicated in a change in delivery. When I asked Deborah why it was hard to decide not to have a baby, why did she not continue in the strong fluid style of speaking she had used throughout the interview and simply say “it was hard because I am a nurturing person, and it saddens and angers me that I am not recognised as such by others because I am not a mother”? Why did she struggle, and cry, and eventually find the extraordinary phrase “the sense of myself as a mother”?

When she tried to express the ‘something’ that had made that decision so hard to make, she faltered, and ended her sentence with “it's hard to explain”. If I frame Deborah's experience through Ettinger's matrixial theory, I might understand her uncharacteristic struggle to find words for her experience in the first part of this extract indicative of a dimension of trans-subjective relationship that was beyond symbolization. Ettinger (2009, p.393) writes that “a retroactive matrixial ‘sense’ may reach its archaic roots in relations with the other”. The idea that particular kinds of interactions that Deborah has with some others resonated with her earlier matrixial experience helps to make sense of her “sense” of herself as a mother. But the matrixial is grounded in an experience of subjectivity as encounter that is pre-linguistic, and since our linguistic frames develop in the phallic sphere it is difficult to even think the

matrixial. It is possible that Deborah struggled because her experience was beyond the limits of the language available to her to think or to communicate about it.

After her initial struggle to find words, Deborah's two pauses and an "um" may have been an attempt to collect herself again, to reposition herself as a reliable subject through recourse to the logical, reasonable language in which she had been trained to express her thoughts. She attempted an explanation through talk of a range of "elements of myself" in which she realized a "nurturing sort of part of me" in other ways in her life, but even here she was not able to articulate her thoughts and feelings with the same clarity that she did elsewhere in the interview. Finally, in the last sentence, with a significant shift of pronoun from "I" to "you", she hinted at the limitations of that realization in her social worlds, because she was not a biological mother. The I-you shift suggests that the idea that being 'nurturing' was not possible if one is not a biological mother is the 'message' that she perceived from others in their encounters with her.

Deborah's shift from "sense" to "idea" is also significant. The former has a stronger affective meaning than the latter. It is coloured with the totality of associations and references to an internalized experience of 'mother' that encompasses the richness of her fantasies of Elinor and Alisdair "down the back", in ways that the cognitive notion of a generalized "idea" does not. I might also read her initial attempt to do so expressed in terms of embodied affect ("sense") and her subsequent shift to the more logical, cognitive "idea" as an overwriting of the matrixial by language structured in the phallic dimension.

During this part of the interview Deborah moved from her inability to relinquish a "sense" of herself as a "mother", articulated with a tearful catch in her voice, to—after a pause—the less powerful (in terms of its symbolic power) "idea" of myself as a "parent, nurturer, um, type of person". I understand this shift to be indicative of the process of adaptation of her fantasy of herself as a mother that Deborah—and other participants—had made, or were in the long process of making. When Deborah spoke of "those parts of me [that] exist, and are used, and are valued" in other ways in her life, she illustrated how this process might happen. Rather than understanding those "parts" as something she had not developed because she had not become a mother, she had become engaged in a process (both conscious and unconscious) of mining her maternal fantasies for the aspects of 'mother' that she recognised and valued in herself, and taking pleasure in embodying what she understood to be those maternal dimensions of her subjectivity in a life without biological children.

This is not so much a process of doing other things *instead of* being a mother, but rather of what she described as being ‘maternal’ finding its embodied expression in her life in different forms. It may be that through this process Deborah was able to keep something of her “sense of myself as a mother” intact. (I say “something” because there are socially constructed limits to this process, as I discuss further below). Conceiving of ‘maternal’ in this way requires a radical shift in thinking from a popular understanding that constrains it to an embodied relationship between a woman and a child. Writing of the matrixial Pollock (2009, p.7) asks:

Where is *maternal* subjectivity, and is it confined to a *maternal* subject? Is it singular? (...) Can the maternal situation, which implies transformation to a new or different condition of being as a result of a co-becoming, occur without an other that/who in the same process is coming into being, and thus bringing about in a simultaneous *encounter-event* the complex that might be named the *maternal*?

Deborah’s words suggest that she had understood and identified the notions of “nurturing” and being “maternal” as “elements” of herself that constituted the sense of herself as a mother. Excluded from identification with the subjectivity of ‘mother’ because she had not had children, Deborah had decoupled ‘nurturing’ from ‘biological mother’ in her own mind by identifying other relationships in her life in which she embodied ‘nurturing’. That is, in understanding herself to be applying her ‘maternal’ elements in other relationships she was able to keep intact her “sense of myself as a mother”; she distinguished between being a *mother*, and being ‘*maternal*’ through doing a different form of what for her constituted ‘mothering’.

In terms of other people’s acknowledgement of her capacity to nurture however, she perceived these alternative ways of being ‘maternal’ to be judged inadequate. This judgment caused Deborah considerable distress; in another part of her interview she commented “(t)hose are the times, I think, when I feel the pain the most, is when I get a sense that a judgment [of her] is being passed. When I feel that people have *no reason* to be making the judgment other than an observation that we don’t have children”. For Deborah this judgment implied that being ‘maternal’ in other ways is popularly understood to be both less adequate than being so as a biological mother—it’s “not the same”, as several participants noted—and also *unacceptable* in some way. Deborah’s two little points of laughter and use of the word “strangely” were maybe intended to signal to me that she realized that on a common sense level what she was saying was absurd. They were designed to soften her articulation of the notion that her relationship with others or with pets was in some way enacting her sense of herself as a mother. They were necessary as a narrative device in this way because she perceived that such a notion is understood by others to be laughable at best; at worst

objectionable (“entirely inappropriate” with some people in her workplace) and unspeakable. She understood it to be “inappropriate” that the relationships were parental, because values such as nurturing and concern are closely associated with the maternal, and expression of the maternal is limited to the care of children by their (preferably biological) mothers in dominant discourse.¹¹⁹ Although it was her *experience* that these relationships express her “sense of myself as a mother” she did not feel comfortable in saying this, and disavowed her own maternity in these relationships.

“And yet”; and yet, even though it did not make sense and was not socially speakable, this was Deborah’s experience and she wanted to be as honest and full in her response as she could be, and to offer that experience to me for this research. Even as she disavowed it, she also (tentatively) claimed it.¹²⁰ Perhaps it was also important to her to honour her experience of that “maternal” sense of herself, just as it was later when she wrote of my use her fantasy children’s names giving them “a validity or reality I’m pleased to gift them (and myself)”. The “and yet” was an expression of the tension she experienced in the contrast between her sense of herself as being “maternal” and the lack of social acknowledgement of this because it had not been expressed in biological motherhood. This “tension” was not fully articulated in her sentence; one side of it is the way in which her being maternal is not recognised socially, but the other side—the way in which she understands herself in some ways to be a mother—was unspoken; perhaps an “unthought known” (Bollas 1987, p.3). In this aspect too, Deborah’s experience exceeded the capacity for expression in discourses of maternity.

On the face of it, the idea that nurturing is intrinsic to her would suggest that Deborah was conflating ‘woman’ and ‘nurturing’ in an essentialist way, but I do not think this is an adequate analysis. I argue rather that part of her difficulty in talking about these feelings is that she was very anxious *not* to adopt an essentialist approach, but she found it hard to talk about her responses without appearing to do so. This is my dilemma as a feminist researcher as well. In Chapter 2 I discussed the notion of ‘nurture’, and the ways it has been theorized to develop in an individual from an object relations and matrixial perspective. I further engage with Ettinger’s matrixial in this chapter in order to work through how these women’s responses might be understood in a way that avoids framing them in an essentialist way.

¹¹⁹ It is important to note that the word ‘inappropriate’ has a different resonance in different professional contexts. In some contexts it is particularly important that relationships between professionals and the people they work with are understood to be different from family roles because of the potential for damage to all concerned through inequalities of power.

¹²⁰ I had a strong sense throughout the interview that Deborah, as a senior academic herself, was wanting to do all she could to support me as a new researcher, particularly as I am working in a field that has such personal relevance for her.

My focus in this chapter is the fluidity and durability of fantasies of maternity that the women I interviewed saw as integral to their sense of themselves, after the potential to embody that maternity has passed. I use short vignettes of the interviews with Connie and Lynn to illustrate these persistent fantasies of the maternal.

6.2 Maternal fantasies as dynamic, fluid and durable

Alongside their grieving, “what remains?” for a number of the women were their fantasies of a specific child or children and their “sense of myself as a mother”, read idiosyncratically, that had not found expression in becoming a biological mother.

There are two aspects to these fantasies: the specific fantasies of a child or children and the more general fantasies of being a mother. Since I did not ask about their fantasies of a specific child or children, and only stumbled across them by accident as it were, I am not aware whether all participants had such fantasies, and I analyze them only briefly before moving on.

Specific fantasies of a child or children

Deborah’s email, telling me about her highly detailed fantasy of Elinor and Alisdair, made it clear that even though it was some years since the decision not to have children had passed, her fantasy of them was intact. Perhaps Deborah—and other participants who spoke of their fantasy children in very explicit ways—was able to sustain her fantasies of Elinor and Alisdair in a way that isolated them in a private, conscious ‘inner world’; separate from her more general sense of herself as a mother/nurturer. Describing her own relationship to her fantasy of a child when the possibility of giving birth to her had passed Mantell (2003, p.227) writes:

(N)ow that an era of my life is over, and my schoolfriends are becoming grandmothers, I miss the child I never had. I know what Catriona would have been like. I have a mental picture of her, which I have built like one of those criminal profilers whose formulations—let’s be honest—never fit too well.

Rosen (2005, p.188) writes that “(u)ndone dreams, our failures as humans, may never be rectified in our lifetimes. But we can invest in our fantasies about our children”.

Mantel’s “let’s be honest” highlights her awareness that her fantasy of Catriona is somewhat idealised; it is one that has never had to correspond with the realities of embodied existence,

and yet, like Deborah's, it is surprisingly detailed.¹²¹ The women who did discuss these specific fantasies with me talked in a way that suggested that they continued to think of them as Mantell did, even after the possibility of their being embodied was past; not with the intense longing they once had, but rather with a kind of nostalgic treasuring that is not dissimilar to the affectionate remembrance people often hold for loved ones who have long died, when the pain of early grieving is over.¹²² For several participants these specific fantasies took the form of a belief or hope that they would go on to mother the child(ren) in a different life, as I have discussed previously (see p.90), suggesting that their fantasy of them was postponed indefinitely, rather than abandoned.

Maternal fantasies as dynamic

I turn now to participants' more general fantasies of themselves as a mother, and here I focus particularly on the experience of the 13 older participants, who understood their potential to have a biological child to be past.

In the previous chapter, in which I discussed the grief expressed in these women's talk about their loss, I drew parallels between the ways in which individuals experience and respond to the pain of loss and the infantile processes of mourning that Klein wrote about in *Mourning and its Relation to Manic-Depressive States* (1940/1986). In relating the losses of circumstantial childlessness to the aspect of mourning in which Klein theorized that the individual re-introjects and reinstates and "preserves" the loved object however, the picture is more complex. The relationship these women had with their fantasy child and their sense of themselves as a mother was and had been part of their 'inner world'; indeed it was their ability to make it 'external' that was lost. In terms of Klein's explication of an object relations framework of grieving, their process would be to mourn for this loss and, as part of that mourning, to "preserve" the potential to embody "the sense of myself as a mother" in some way.

The idea of 'preservation' however, highlights the inadequacies of Klein's theorising for these circumstances. It is too static to account for the dynamic ways in which many of these women

¹²¹ Mantell (2009, p.227) went on to write, "(s)he would be nothing like me at all. She would be strong like my mother, broad-shouldered like my husband, with that milky Irish skin that freckles but never tans. I see her small competent hands, chopping an onion; making unwritten dishes, which she has never been taught to make".

¹²² Clearly there is a significant difference here, in that bereaved people have the embodied memories of the person who has died to draw on in this remembering. However, my speculation is borne out in my work as a counsellor, where I see parallels with the ways circumstantially childless women talk (very cautiously) about fantasy children and some aspects of the ways bereaved people talk about someone who has died. People might 'memorialize' others by doing things such as naming a loved pet or making their computer password the name they had chosen "if I ever had a child", for example. My musing on the names that participants chose as pseudonyms for this research (in Chapter 4, footnote 79, p.93) is related to this idea.

described their maternal fantasies as having continued, but also shifted, transformed, and adapted over time.¹²³ In the vignettes of Connie and Lynn that follow, I illustrate this process.

6.3 A challenge to maternal fantasies as continuing

Not all of the participants in this study spoke of their maternal fantasies as an ongoing experience in their lives. Kim, for example, described herself in this way:

I think my trajectory was; thinking about it, sort of [pause] having a period where I sort of felt I *did* want to have children, but not having the situation where I *did* [pause] see myself being actually able to do it, um, and then [pause] forgetting about it [...] well, more or less just [pause] moving on to other things.

A closer analysis of the interviews of the women who spoke in this way suggests that these descriptions are a little more complex than they seem initially though. Connie, like many of the older participants, spoke of the intensity and yearning to have a child fading as time passed, and her drawing also reflected this. As they moved into their 40s she and several other women drew on a biological discourse of hormonal change to explain this difference. In describing her drawing (see p.130; I repeat the first section for ease of reading) Connie said,

In my 20s I'd just had, you know, faith, and hope, that it was all going to happen at some point. And um, so, probably just was, leading quite a rosy life, and enjoying myself, and um, but then, in my 30s I, ahh, yeah. My friends started having families, and um, and, I wasn't in the, either wasn't in the right relationship or not in a relationship, and towards the end of my 30s the really, the anxiety and the pain [taps drawing], the black part was very strong. Probably until my early 40s. And umm [pause] I must say now, I really feel I'm here, um definitely the hormones, now that I'm 45, it's such an, it's so noticeable that just the, the body just doesn't ask for it anymore I think. Just um, really over the last two or three years I feel the hormones are really settling, really settling down. And I feel um, much more content [pause] ah er, with my life, than before, I think. I feel like I can really be myself. And umm, and feel relieved I've come out of this black part [small laugh]. And I feel like I can just move on. Yeah.

On the face of it Connie's drawing and explanation would seem to suggest that her maternal fantasies were simply in a process of fading out with time, challenging my argument that they persist. This was certainly how Connie seemed to see it; she told me, "I'm sure that over time the acceptance will grow more and more. I think the grief I can still feel now every now and then, I'm sure time will solve that". It is possible however that Connie's reasons for this claim complicate her reconciliation to being childless. It may have been important to Connie to consciously abandon her hopes of embodying her maternal fantasies in the way she suggested,

¹²³ In their work that outlines a new 'continuing bonds' paradigm for conceptualizing grieving in the context of bereavement Klass *et al* (1996, p.16) made a similar comment. They write that 'internalization' as it is understood psychoanalytically "does not accurately describe" a process that is "more colorful, dynamic and interactive than the word "internalization" suggests".

but on another level perhaps she had both postponed them for a future life and adapted them for this one.

Connie's biological explanation for her adaptation to not having children fits well with her explanation for why she wanted to have children ("I guess it's just, it's really instinct. It's really [pause] it's nature"). While it seems likely that there is indeed a biochemical dimension to this experience, Connie draws here on understandings of a biological "instinct" that do not also take account of the social changes in her life that age had brought. A number of participants commented that as they moved into their 40s their sense of loss was less likely to be triggered by friends announcing a new pregnancy, for example, and that those close to them were less likely to question them about their plans to have a child. So while it is likely that Connie felt grief associated with the loss of her potential to have a child less often and less intensely, and less frequently found herself yearning to have a child, it may be that her maternal *fantasy* had not waned in the same way.

Another possible interpretation of Connie's words takes into account the ways in which she may have been unconsciously defended against thinking and talking about her fantasies of mothering her "real boys" persisting. After some difficult relationship experiences in her 20s and 30s choosing a partner who would be a "companion" that she could "trust" had been a priority for her. Her partner was an older man who did not want to have more children. She talked about beginning a relationship with him as "a far more mature way of starting a relationship? You know it was not like butterflies and oh, here we go!" She was not prepared to "jump into something again and just [pause] be heartbroken again". Connie was faced with the same "calculus" that Gina had described when she spoke of choosing between "this abstract scenario that might or might not work out, or this real live person that you're in love with".¹²⁴ In terms of deciding between staying with this man who did not want another child and her own longing to have a child she described the choice she made as "just [pause] yeah mind over matter [...] I grew towards the conclusion that this was my life right now". Her

¹²⁴ In this respect these women challenge theorists of individualization who suggest that now "traditional bonds play only a minor role and the love between men and women has likewise proved vulnerable and prone to failure" (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1995, p.73). They argue for "a new type of unmarried mother (...) who wants to have a child alone, without a man or a traditional kind of partnership". In my sample only one woman was contemplating sole parenthood in this way, and almost all of the participants specifically said they would definitely not choose to have a child alone.

words imply an active suppression of her maternal desires and a deliberate investment in her relationship.¹²⁵

The “right now” suggests that her strong belief in reincarnation and the implications of it for being a mother to her fantasy dark-haired “real boys” in another lifetime made it more possible to exert “mind over matter in this way”. Connie took a long view of her maternal subjectivity, and said,

I just think I’m preparing myself now to become a mother in the next lifetime [laughs]. I think there’s a lot of things that I can work on for myself—particularly in the relationship—and I think if I really focus on that this lifetime then I create a good foundation to have a family next time.

Apart from postponing her fantasies of a children in this way Connie described two parts of her life which can be interpreted as being manifestations of her adapting and continuing her maternal fantasies (in this lifetime). Firstly she spoke of being very close to her nieces, and wanting to play an active part in their lives. Her relationship with these girls “fulfills the idea of having a younger generation that you have a bond with” for her. She also talked of taking pleasure in caring regularly for her three year old step-granddaughter.

The second aspect was the work she planned with her partner. ‘Moving on’ for her involved a reconsideration of her career since around the age of 37, and retraining in an entirely different field as a primary school teacher.¹²⁶ She and her partner planned to work together in developing countries because that “definitely is looking for contributing more than just enjoying life and living it away. Yes. I definitely look for a sense of purpose”. This idea of contributing, finding a way to live life that gave it a sense of purpose and extended it beyond the scope of taking pleasure in one’s own life and “living it away” has a sense of *generativity* about it that I relate to Connie and other womens’ fantasies of maternity. Although it comes from a different paradigm I find the concept of ‘generativity’ to be useful and not incommensurate with an object relations approach in this respect. Chodorow (2003, p.1185) writes:

(A)lthough motherhood is usually one central meaning of generativity for women, generativity for both sexes means more than parenting one’s own biological children (Erikson 1950). It can involve many kinds of creative and caring activities, or activities that foster the next generation or the environment. Such activities directly express the parental components of generativity.

¹²⁵ It is hard to know how much to read into the phrase ‘mind over matter’. A matrixial reading of Connie’s use of this term might suggest that she used it unconsciously to describe a process that was for her a choice between ‘mind’ that was rational and measured against ‘matter’ that had the indefinable blurriness and elusiveness of an embodied matrixial dimension of her subjectivity.

¹²⁶ The late 30s, especially around 37, 38, seems to have been a time when many of the older participants were confronted more urgently by the possibility of their remaining without biological children. This, for example, was the time that both Lynn and Lesley talked about having become very depressed.

Chodorow uses the term ‘generativity’ here in the Eriksonian sense of a “concern in establishing and guiding the next generation” (Erikson 1963, p. 267). Within the context of his theory of life-span development Erikson understood generativity not to be limited to the sphere of raising children but more broadly as a stage where an individual “nurtures, teaches, leads and promotes the next generation while generating life products and outcomes that benefit the social system and promote its continuity” (McAdam & de St. Aubin 1992, p.1003). Considering ways to live out this kind of generative gesture in other spheres of their lives seems to have been part of the process of adaptation of their maternal fantasies for many of these older participants, as Lynn’s narrative, which I discuss next, will illustrate.

In summary, Connie’s story draws attention to two important aspects of the durable quality of these maternal fantasies. Although she presents her fantasies as having faded, it is also possible to understand them as continuing in several different forms: caring for and maintaining a “bond” with other children in her life who were important to her; postponing her general fantasies of maternity and specific fantasies of children for another life; and finding a sense of purpose in contributing to the education and development of others, particularly children. While she still experienced a sense of loss and grieved for not having a child at times, she also described herself as happy; her relationship with her partner and a sense of “fulfillment” in her work brought her pleasure. These sources of satisfaction were explicitly weighed against the experience of childlessness.

6.4 “A little something I haven’t put aside yet”: the adaptation of fantasy as an ongoing process

Many of these participants hinted at or spoke directly of a sense of *something* remaining—something apart from the traces of grief—in a way that was similar to the “sense of myself as a mother” that Deborah found so difficult to “relinquish” and to articulate. Lynn’s narrative is a good example of this ‘something’ that remained.¹²⁷ From her mid 20s to her early 30s she had a long, unsatisfactory and “messy” relationship with a man who already had a child and did not want more. During this time she became pregnant twice, and had an abortion each time. These were very complex and painful experiences for her because she had felt torn; she had very much wanted to have a child, but not in the circumstances she was currently in, or with the man who was the father.

Around age 37-38 the quite severe depression that Lynn had struggled with in recent years culminated in “a bad time” in which she also found herself coping with some physical health

¹²⁷ I first introduce Lynn in Chapter 3, p.78.

issues as well as psychological ones. She described herself as feeling more ambivalent about having children, “just the whole, getting older, how much harder it would be, feeling, feeling older actually, feeling a lot older [...] and feeling like, God it would be hard”. Around this time she met the man she went on to marry, and described herself as being “open’ to the relationship because of the “space” she had come to in relation to having children, although she knew from the outset of the relationship that he was neither able nor willing to have children. In her interview she described their relationship as a “fantastic” one in which she “feels blessed”. She said the past two years with him had “kind of been the happiest of my life [pause] *without* children!”[laughs]. Her laughter was presumably ironic because she had described spending much of her 30s grieving about her childlessness and actively trying to find ways to have a child.

Alongside this happiness Lynn also talked about an ongoing sadness and difficulty that her not having had a child created for her. After speaking about the contribution children would make to a family she said,

I guess I’ve got, I feel, like I can, even just talking about it, I can feel the emotion in my, sort of physically in my body, and I [pause] I’m a great [pause and breath in] I sort of believe in trying to deal, that it’s helpful to deal with things in terms of your physical health [pause] as much as anything [pause]. Yeah [pause] I sort of feel like, I think you store grief in your body[pause] and umm [...] maybe it’s, maybe it is about understanding it better.

Lynn’s words are full of hesitation, confusion and tension. Her life was happy and fulfilled and her pleasure in her relationship was clear, and at the same time there was *something* that felt unresolved, perhaps incomplete or lost to her. She was unable to articulate what it was, but she experienced it as embodied “emotion” and believed it was important to “deal” with it in some way.

I summarized the way I understood Lynn’s position to her at this point in the interview as one of having been through a period of some ambivalence about having a child that was still continuing, although lessened, and seeming mostly to be feeling she was coming to terms with the idea that she would not have a child. She agreed, but added,

I think that’s right, yeah, I still, I still do have some stuff that I’m [pause] I feel like is unexplored, or unarticulated or something [...] it’s almost like it’s, I still feel like I’ve got a little something that I haven’t quite put aside yet. [...] I don’t quite know how to do it really, yeah, and I don’t know whether it’s, I suspect it’s mixed up with something about the abortions and stuff as well.[pause] But mostly I’m pretty comfortable with where I’m at.

I relate Lynn’s “little something that I haven’t quite put aside yet” to Deborah’s discussion of her inability to “relinquish” her “sense of myself as a mother”, to the black asterisk—“it’s just

little”—in her womb in Gina’s drawing (see p.94), and to the “maternal thing” that “came” for Maree. I speculate that this “little something” that revealed itself in different ways in women’s talk is the nub of their fantasies of maternity.

As I discussed in chapter 3, Lynn explored this same territory in her drawing (see p.77). In it she moved in a clockwise direction around the paper, her small drawings showing aspects of her past unsatisfactory life (“some horrible job that I hated”), and moving to a depiction of her happy life with her husband, moving hand-in-hand towards the future together (“the rainbow and the Earth: it’s kind of a future thing”). It was at this point that Lynn added the huge breasts “over the whole thing”,

because what I always have in [pause] because I, if I really try to feel [pause] feel not having a child I think I get left with, I do have quite deep feelings of, of having missed the opportunity to nurture, and I still [pause], I still would like that experience of a baby suckling on my nipple and I, [pause] I, yeah I feel it quite physically, the [pause] that [pause] I sort of think of it as a loss or something like that.

Like Deborah, Lynn clearly struggled to articulate her experience in language. I have suggested that through drawing Lynn was better able to capture the ineffable quality of the “something” that eluded her; something that was “over the whole thing” of her life, in spite of her happiness in a relationship. For her it was best symbolized in the breasts that invoked the bodily act of nurturing a baby through breastfeeding.

Like many of these participants, Lynn is a highly articulate woman who drew frequently on feminist critiques of popular notions of femininity in her talk about her experiences. She told me that she had been keen to find “sophisticated and intelligent” comment on the issue of circumstantial childlessness and had searched out an old copy of *Broadsheet* to find “other women’s words”, but found there was nothing “salient” in feminist literature for her; “the focus was on women who didn’t *want* to have children, rather than women who did”.¹²⁸ She told one story of her sister, who, knowing how much she wanted to have a child, suggested to Lynn that she should have IVF in order to achieve a pregnancy, saying “You’re not, you’re not a real woman until you’ve had children”. In response Lynn said, “Well I just ignored it, because it’s such a [pause] unreasonable thing to say. [laughs] [...] I mean, I actually *don’t* believe that at all. I think there’s *lots* of ways to contribute to [pause] the planet or whatever. Women aren’t just um, child bearers”. In trying to make sense of their longing for a child and the experience of biological mothering, it seems likely that Lynn—and other participants who were positioned in this way—would have explored the potential to understand it as an

¹²⁸ *Broadsheet* was a New Zealand feminist magazine that was published monthly from 1972-1997.

outcome of social imperatives and found these did not explain her yearning adequately for her. There appears to be something in the experience of circumstantial childlessness that exceeds the potential for either popular understandings of motherhood and femininity, or feminist critiques of these discourses, to explain it.

Lynn was five years younger than Deborah, and her relationship with her husband—and therefore her realization that she would not have a child—was only two years old. It seems likely that her progress through the process of adaptation of her fantasies that I suggested Deborah had made (and was making) was not as fully developed as it was for Deborah. When I asked her about her plans for the future she said,

Lynn: I guess, uh, I, I sort of, I've still got [pause and big breath in] I'd sort of like to consolidate a career a bit more [pause] always been interested in government. I was quite a political activist in my sort of 20s, and I'd like to [pause] eventually go back to that [pause] probably [pause]. Take my career somewhere. I feel more, um, I guess I feel more energy for that now, yeah [pause] have more time.

Lois: And is that about having a purpose, do you think?

Lynne: "It's a bit of [pause] it's a bit of a purpose I think, it's [pause] I'm not quite sure what it is, it's about um [long pause and breath in] I just want to kind of contribute somehow to [pause] I guess we all do, making the world a better place, um [pause] and I do believe that you can, if you, yeah [pause] yeah.[...] Yeah, so there's that, and the other thing is that umm, my husband and I are quite umm [pause] keen to live a more [pause] to set ourselves up with a more sustainable kind of, you know, like a bigger vege garden, we've got bees, we want to get chickens, that kind of thing, um, and we'd like to look into, you know, alternative power stuff and things like that, [...] so that's another thing that I want to put some energy into, yeah [pause] and then I've got my sister's family, who I also do feel, you know, I want to do that [pause] auntie thing".

Lynn faltered and appeared lost for an answer as she began in the first section. Unlike Deborah, who was able to identify ways in which she was enacting aspects of her maternal fantasies of nurturing, it seemed that Lynn was still invested in future plans that were as yet unclear. Linguistically, "I've still got" is a clear statement of 'what remains', but in terms of her meaning, the phrase was unfinished. It seems Lynn was not sure *what* she still had, and the sentence carries the weight of implication that something was understood to be lost. Her big breath in could indicate an unconscious need for energy to strengthen her from a point of loss.¹²⁹ Her plans still seemed undefined and somewhat tentative at this point. The extract can be read as a conversation between two parts of herself; one that was a little less sure, and another that was wanting to reassure herself with repetition of the affirmative "Yeah".

¹²⁹ This assertion is based on my close reading of the interviews of the 10 cases I had chosen for more detailed study, in which I paid particular attention to participants' breathing patterns at points in the interview where they were speaking of issues that seemed particularly affect-laden for them (see for example my discussion of Kelly in Chapter 3, p.75). It is also grounded in my experience as a counsellor, where I have learned to hear a gasping intake of breath as a possible indicator of an issue that the speaker is struggling with in some way.

This sense of vagueness shifted in the second section with Lynn's second big intake of breath. Unlike Connie, the idea of 'purpose' did not resonate, but she too was interested in an active sense of *contribution*. Her repeated use of "yeah" and her emphasis on "I *do* believe that you can" (make the world a better place) again suggest that she was both stating this as a belief and also convincing herself of its truth. This small section (where she discussed the plans she and her husband had for a sustainable life) was the one in which her demeanor, affect and voice tone was the most spirited and positive of the whole interview. It was clear that she had a lot of enthusiasm for it. Daphne de Marneffe (2006b) writes that:

Maternal desire is not about turning children into accessories to our narcissism, but about connecting us to what really matters, to our own deepest human desires and values, as a wellspring for caring action—toward our own children, but also toward the larger world.

It could be that in the absence of children in her life Lynn was looking for—and taking pleasure in—other ways to tap into "a wellspring for caring action".

In summary, the research materials associated with Lynn further illustrate that it was often difficult to find language to understand or explain some important aspects of the experience of circumstantial childlessness. When she talked about what was lost, it was the opportunity to "nurture", and when she spoke of what was still available to her, it was a sense of reaching beyond herself; of finding fulfillment through 'contributing' to the world in some way. Although she was happy in her life with her husband, there was still an inexplicable "something" that continued.

6.5 Other nurturing relationships

Many other participants in this research also talked about a range of relationships in their lives in which they embodied 'maternal' in other ways, while not being mothers. Four participants were counsellors, nine were in positions of teaching or mentoring adult students, two were preschool teachers, one cared for people with intellectual disabilities, and one was a primary school teacher. At least four participants spoke in the interviews about having made a deliberate choice to change direction in their work and retrain in order to work in roles that involved working with children or caring for people in some way, when it became clear that they would not have a biological child. Lesley, for example, described having children as "one of the most creative things you could do". She spoke of a time in her late 30s when she decided:

I could sit and grieve, I could sit and be an administrator, be good at my job but not enjoy it, and grieve [...] and slowly draw into myself and retreat. Or I could do something different. Yeah. [...]

It was about being creative. Yeah. In an important way. I just realise I can be creative in many, many different ways and it was about having [pause] using my energy constructively and channelling it.

Almost all participants talked about taking pleasure in their relationships with children in their lives, particularly those that were part of their extended families. They spoke of the importance of caring for and spending time with step-children, grandchildren, god-children, nieces and nephews.

A significant number of participants told me that they had very close relationships with their pets, and saw these relationships as a way of having a nurturing relationship with another creature. Sonya, for example, said, “I definitely, yeah, definitely mother [her pets] like specially you know [her dog, sitting on the floor near us], [...] he’s just, you know he’s my shadow a lot of the time. He’s, I always call him my baby boy”. Similarly, at the end of a discussion about the opportunities having a child offered people to “cut through” an innate selfishness Gina said:

And, I mean its [pause] you can’t compare, when you talk to other women you can’t compare children to dogs, but I’ve had a dog and my relationship with her was really special in a lot of ways. She was, she and I had an unconditional bond of love and understanding. It’s a different kind of relationship than you have with people your own age. And it’s that unconditionality and that sense of selflessness and that [pause]. *You* know what I’m saying eh.

With her repetition of “you can’t compare” Gina wanted to make it clear to me that she understood the comparison between a relationship with a pet and one with a child to be a socially illegitimate one to make. Nevertheless, she *did* make that comparison, and it was that relationship that came to mind when she thought of her experience of the “unconditional bond of love and understanding” that she understood to be created through a selfless commitment to nurturing another creature that so many women saw as the essence of the maternal relationship. She struggled to name the elements of this relationship but, knowing me to have children, ended with a call to me to acknowledge that I understood, that I *knew* what she was unable to articulate, because I am a mother.

A number of women talked about exploring options around adoption or fostering children, and two spoke of recently having taken on a fostering role of some sort with a small child. Many talked about their experience of caring for other people’s children as being tremendously important to them. Gina, for example, told the story of travelling around the globe to spend time with her closest friend when her baby was born:

I was able to hold [him], every morning while she took a shower and had a break from him, and put my finger in his mouth to stop him crying, and sing to him, and just be there for his first few weeks

of life in a way that was *really* precious. So [pause] she did that, for me [pause, and close to tears] [...] she knew that there was a [pause] hole there, and that she can help a little bit. It was really precious, it really was. It was so cool. As far as infancy goes, this is it for me; [he] was pretty much it. And it was really special. Really special. I felt incredibly fortunate.

Gina's repeated use of "really" and "precious" gave a sense of the power of this experience for her, and also the inexpressibility of what it meant for her to comfort and nurture a baby in this way. She perceived this time to have given her an opportunity to experience an embodied version of nurturing an infant that would otherwise have been unavailable to her.

It might be argued that Gina's perception of this experience as 'precious' is a product of a popular but unrealistic narrative of mothering a newborn baby as a blissful time of closeness. As Ruddick (1995, p.29) commented however, "(i)t is hard to speak precisely about mothering. Overwhelmed with greeting card sentiment, we have no realistic language in which to capture the ordinary/extraordinary pleasures and pains of maternal work". Gina's words may also reflect her experience of her time with the baby triggering the "bodily, habitual, emotional remembering" of her own infancy (Stone 2012, p.6) that is archaic and preverbal, as I discussed earlier (in Chapter 2, p.33). It may be that in Ettinger's matrixial theory there *is* the "language" that makes it possible to speak about aspects of the maternal experience that was not available to Ruddick in 1995, and that addresses the ways these women deliberately develop nurturing relationships. I discuss this possibility further in the section below.

6.6 "It's not the same"

If the potential to express the nurturing qualities that develop via intersubjective and trans-subjective processes that I have described in Chapter 2 is available for these women, why did Deborah speak of a "struggle" with the ways "those parts of me exist, and are used, and are valued" in other places and relationships in her life? What lies under the "tension" that she tries to express; "you know, if you're not a *mother* [...] then you're not maternal, or you're not nurturing, or you're not something"?

I suggest that Deborah's shift from the embodied/affective quality of "sense" to the more cognitive one of "idea" and her struggles with the "tension" that she spoke of both have their origins in the way this dimension of the maternal is not recognised in the social contexts she inhabits. In part, I suggest this is because the matrixial dimension is suppressed by the phallic structure of language itself, by the dominance of discourses that posit that relationships begin at birth, and by a culture that valorizes the autonomous individual and fears the formlessness and permeability of subjectivities that is implied in the matrixial dimension.

Even if the matrixial dimension is not taken into account however, a maternal subjectivity is not socially acknowledged in women who do not have children for other reasons. In spite of a growing recognition that there are many ways in which to become a mother, it seems that culturally these are still compared to the gold standard of the biological mother who continues to care for her child. Discussing ‘infertility’ Letherby (2012, p.13) notes that “(b)iological (and if at all possible genetic) parenthood complement dominant discourses of ‘true’ motherhood and fatherhood and ‘proper’ families”.

Kelly and her partner shared care of his two small children with his former wife. Apart from the segment I quoted earlier (in Chapter 5, p.126), Kelly maintained a steady, strong voice and unbroken narrative throughout her interview. At the end of it however, I asked her how it was to talk about these issues. Although she considered that the interview would probably not impact on the decision (not to have children) in response to this question, Kelly seemed shaken:

[breath in] Ummm [shaking voice] [pause][...] maybe I’m kidding myself [pause] um [pause] yeah, and I, you know I may never lose that feeling that [pause] um [pause] it’s not the same, it’s not quite the same, as having your own, but [pause] yeah, it, it’s just that acceptance of it really. It does pull at your heartstrings, it certainly does, it does you know [pause]. I can’t be called someone’s Mum [pause] um.

The strength of the dominant discourse (of ‘true’ motherhood and fatherhood and ‘proper’ families) is such that while many participants talked about ways in which they understood themselves to be enacting maternal subjectivities, the idea that it was “not the same”—in the sense of ‘not as good’—was often asserted, as it was here. “I can’t be called someone’s Mum” was for Kelly the essence of this denial of her maternal subjectivity: no matter how much she was involved in her stepchildren’s lives, it would never be possible to be called “Mum”; to experience the appellative recognition of her ‘true’ maternal subjectivity. Her use of the bodily metaphor of “pulling at your heartstrings” and her repetition of “it does” underlines her powerful emotional response to this positioning.

Toni, who cared for her niece for three nights every week from the age of 18 months until she left home in her later teens, is another participant who illustrated this well. She talked about her relationship with her niece as one of “watching a child grow, being involved in those decisions about, you know, her wellbeing. And, and her daily life, making her school lunch, picking her up from school, those sorts of things, supervising homework”. She spoke of “strong vivid memories” of her at age “ten, eleven, I just love those years, particularly with her. And sometimes I’ll just dream of that, you know, and picture her so clearly [...]. And I’ll wake up and I’ll wake and realise I’ve had tears, just, you know, I’ll wake with wet

cheeks". The image, and Toni's repetition of "I'll wake" that breaks her narrative flow, powerfully evokes a recollection of an intense maternal entanglement with a loved niece. Her words suggest however, that although she was closely, emotionally and bodily connected to her in what might easily be described as a 'maternal' sense, her part in her niece's life was not acknowledged by close family, friends and others in her social worlds. She commented that "being a biological mother must offer so much more, because, you know, you get recognition for a start". The painfulness of the nonacknowledgement of her maternal subjectivity is clear in the following segment:

(A)ll my life in that role I've suffered from lack of recognition and that's hurt, like it makes me want to cry, you know, it really hurts, still hurts. So that even [pause] her mum was pretty good at recognising my role. I mean for God's sake I had her three nights a week for years and years and years and *years*. Her mum was quite good at it, but other family who never saw me as just a regular auntie, realised what role I had and [pause], you know, and friends and others often, they didn't seem to have a framework for managing that.

Toni's comment that people in her social worlds did not have a "framework" for understanding her as a mother is a telling one. It seems likely that although many of the women in this study had found ways of expanding 'maternal' in their own thinking, and embodying aspects of it in creative ways in their lives, they did not experience recognition of these dimensions of their maternal selves from others.

While the perceived lack of social recognition makes up one reason that "it's not the same" however, Toni's story suggests a further dimension. Toni is a lesbian and both she and her partner were keen to have a biological child. She described a long and complex process of deciding which of them would bear the child, and finding someone who was willing and suitable to donate sperm to them. In time, Toni did become pregnant but at seven weeks miscarried. She described:

seven weeks of being pregnant and, you know, I remember going to bed and just laughing with glee because I'd hit the stage where I'd be ravenously hungry after a big evening meal and couldn't wait for breakfast, and, you know, laughing about that with [her partner]. And, and having sore breasts and not being able to lie on my tummy in bed and, um, so, so I treasure those memories, yeah and the excitement we had when, when we, you know, when I finally did a pregnancy test and it was positive.

In this story Toni narratively constructed herself as a mother—albeit briefly—in ways that are similar to other participants who were pregnant for a time. Her story focuses on what delighted her about the pregnancy and the sense of being a mother. Both Toni and her partner found the pain of loss very difficult, and although Toni tried to get pregnant again, it did not happen. Eventually her partner decided that she could not face the ongoing hurt of the process and they did not take it any further.

When Toni talked of the pregnancy she spoke almost exclusively of her satisfaction in bodily terms. Although the opportunity to have a child was past because of her age at the time of the interview, she still said, “I love the idea of seeing my growing belly and, and nourishing of the baby and experiencing childbirth and breast feeding. Um, yeah, really, really, really warmed up to that. I still think it would be lovely”. Her repeated use of “really” emphasized how powerful this idea was for her. At the same time, Toni had the skills to deconstruct this dream:

I look at pregnant women and I just like, you know, I think they look incredibly beautiful and, you know, to see that expanding belly I think it just must be such an exciting time. You know, I mean and also, that’s also romanticised, you know, I’ve been, um, I’ve had friends who’ve had horrific pregnancies where they’ve, you know, been sick every single day. [...] So it’s not that I don’t know about those stories are absolutely romanticised.

In spite of this awareness, it seemed that for Toni, the embodied dimension of motherhood entailed something that was different from the social mothering she did with her niece, and exceeded even the potential for the romanticising she expected. Although I find it a difficult conclusion to come to, for her and many of these women, it seems there *was* a dimension of maternal experience that they longed for, and that they experienced as being irretrievably lost when they had not given birth to and cared for a biological child.

6.7 Concluding discussion: being ‘maternal’

In this chapter I have drawn on the narratives and drawings of these circumstantially childless women to show that, although many saw their longing to have a child fade over time, their maternal fantasies did not simply peter out as their fertility waned. In order to understand what their “sense of myself as a mother” is, and why it persists, I have focused on several narratives to illustrate the ways in which, over and over throughout the research material, the fantasy of being a mother and the idea of being ‘maternal’ coalesced around the idea of being ‘nurturing’. This term is broad enough to encompass a spirit of caring, concern for others and the environment, contributing, teaching, mentoring and cherishing, and also carries connotations of feeding and growing in a physical sense, through pregnancy and breastfeeding for example.

As I have noted, these women’s unique maternal fantasies had both conscious and unconscious dimensions, and were a product of the mutual entanglement of the psychic and the social in their lives. Their sense of what ‘mother’ and ‘maternal’ *meant* to them was similarly a product of psychic and social dimensions. Chodorow (1999, p.2) described what I understand by ‘meaning’ in this context in this way:

(M)eaning as we experience it comes always both from without and from within. (...) Meaning is an inextricable mixture of the sociocultural and historically contextualized on the one hand and the personally psychodynamic and psychobiographically contextualized on the other. (...) Some constructions of meaning may be more likely than others, but neither the intrapsychic nor the impersonal past, on the one hand, nor the culturally given, on the other, determines meaning and experience in the immediacy of the present.

Because the meaning of being ‘maternal’ was unique to each woman, it was expressed in idiosyncratic ways in their narratives, but since those meanings are produced psychosocially in the way Chodorow described, they were freighted with the shared cultural values of that concept. It is unsurprising then, that ‘nurturing’ should be the dominant feature of these women’s maternal fantasies, since nurturing is one of the key values associated with maternal care (Stephens 2011).

For these women to maintain a “sense of myself as a mother” without its expression in the care of a biological child, they needed to find ways to decouple ‘nurture’ from ‘mother’, and envision ‘maternal’ more extensively than pregnancy and care for a young child. I have suggested that the older circumstantially childless women in this study had engaged in a long process of adapting their fantasies and embodying ‘nurturing’, in creative and largely satisfying ways in their lives, by reframing of what being ‘mother’ meant to them. In this way the lost object of their capacity to embody their maternal fantasy was partly realized through a constellation of responses to others in their lives (I use ‘others’ in the broadest sense here of life in all its forms; children, adults, animals and also elements of the environment such as insects, plants and ‘the Earth’). I suggest that they did not see these relationships and actions as something they did *instead of* ‘being maternal’ because they had not had a child, but rather as aspects of their ‘maternal’ subjectivity that found their expression in a range of different activities and social relationships.

Positing maternal subjectivity and the capacity to nurture through object relations theory as I have in Chapter 2 has made it possible to conceptualize these nurturing relationships as ‘maternal’, because ‘maternal’ can be understood to extend to relationships other than the emotional and embodied relationships mothers have with their infant or children. Hollway, for example, has suggested that aspects of these maternal subjectivities, in the sense in which I have been discussing them, might become known and available to individuals regardless of whether or not they have children. She writes (2006, p.80) that “equivalent capacities to care

could be precipitated by other caring relationships and responsibilities, not necessarily by one's own baby", but she does not elaborate how this might happen.¹³⁰

The research materials in this study support this claim. I propose that these aspects of maternal subjectivity are available to circumstantially childless women precisely through the same intersubjective and trans-subjective processes that came into play in developing their fantasies of maternity (see chapter 4). That is, I suggest that these women have drawn on their psychosocial knowing/experiencing of maternal subjectivity as a child in embodying aspects of their fantasies of maternity in other nurturing relationships in their adult lives.

Why do these fantasies persist rather than falling away as these women age and cease to be capable of conception? One explanation might be that despite 40 years of feminist work to dismantle the ideologies that link womanhood with motherhood, femininity, and nurturing, for many of these women, these understandings of gendered identity persist. Girls still grow up immersed in a culture that often teaches them that becoming a mother is a desirable goal for women, and they subsequently value those 'maternal' aspects of themselves and want to embody them. Many of these participants' narratives support this argument; Deborah's "tension" that "if you're not a *mother*—you don't have biological children, then you're not maternal, or you're not nurturing, or you're not something" for example, suggests that her perception is that, as far as other people are concerned, she is not understood to be 'maternal' or 'nurturing' because she has not had a child.

However, for me this is not a wholly satisfactory explanation. It is clear that Deborah herself did not understand the issue in that way, and as I worked with the research materials over time it struck me how many of the women I interviewed were like her; highly articulate, educated, self reflexive people who had grown up with mothers who identified as feminists. These participants had a complex understanding of and engagement with the themes and issues that have dominated feminist debate throughout their lifetimes. In spite of this, they did not understand, refer to or explain their experience in these terms. The ways in which many of these participants demonstrated a sophisticated level of acuity around the feminist politics of gender discourse adds weight to my analysis that there is *something* about their experience that these discourses and feminist discourses of biological determinism do not account for; something that the research materials suggest was as an active part of their lives, cutting across the available discourses of maternity, and somehow eluding their capacity to speak of it.

¹³⁰ Hollway draws more extensively on Ettinger's matrixial in later work, e.g. Hollway 2012a.

Matrixial theory offers a further dimension for understanding these women's experiences and the 'something' of their narratives. In Chapter 2 I introduced aspects of matrixial theory that are salient for this project and built an account of the intersubjective and trans-subjective processes through which people have the potential for a 'maternal' subjectivity that is linked with their capacity to care for and nurture others. I discussed the ways in which this subjectivity is potentially available to both men and women, and to mothers and non-mothers, although it may find a particular expression in the care of a child by its biological mother. In Chapter 4 I drew on matrixial theory again in my suggestion that for some women experiencing circumstantial childlessness the "sense of myself as a mother" may be grounded in an archaic embodied experience of a woman's porous trans-subjective relationship with her mother in the late uterine period, *as well as* in the later relationship with her mother and other people and resources in her social world in the period after her birth and throughout her childhood.

A central aspect of matrixial theory is that it has, at its base, an ethics of compassion. What satisfies the self may not be the main driver of an individual's life, as is proposed in theories of individualization. Rather the idea that an individual has the capacity to develop in tandem with others emerges. Viewed through a matrixial lens, these participants may be seen to make connections with others in a 'nurturing' way, via the matrixial dimension of their subjectivity, which they call 'maternal' because of the dominant cultural associations of nurturing with the maternal. Pollock (2009, p.15) notes,

(W)anting a child may be a matter of wishing for a re-encounter with the kind of otherness-in-proximity that is the gift of our mothers to us as woman-subjects, a gift to all subjects that may also be reactivated in a variety of other ways as well, notably in relations with others. Since this gift is primordial and open to every human being it created, it does not need childbearing to realize its potential in human society or creativity.

It is not surprising that this dimension of their subjectivity might be understood as "the sense of myself as a mother". For many women nurturing *is* frequently expressed through the birth and care of a baby and child, for two reasons; that experience is rooted in her archaic trans-subjective relationship with her own mother, and it is the route to the expression of nurturing that is still most validated socially, in spite of feminist work to challenge the assumption that women are inherently nurturing. Matrixial theory proposes that women are particularly likely to re-experience and express the matrixial dimension of their subjectivity in having a child. However, as Pollock suggests, when a woman has not "reactivated" the matrixial dimension of her subjectivity in pregnancy and the birth of a biological child, it is potentially expressed in other ways. Ettinger (e.g. 2006a; 2004) has written extensively of its expression in art-

making and clinical psychoanalytical practice. For some circumstantially childless women, nurturing might be best understood as another dimension of their subjectivity, running alongside the phallic dimensions that develop after birth, that they draw on in a particularly deliberate way in their relationships with others in their life.

If this is true, what yearning is still unmet in their experience? How I can account for Lynn's "little something" that still remains for example? Ettinger's matrixial theory addresses the problem that the body speaks to these women in ways that are not easily expressed in available language. This yearning requires an analysis other than the essentializing of a biological explanation for women's longing to have a child such as 'hormones', and the 'body clock'. I suggest that the ineffable strangeness of the matrixial dimension potentially became more available to Lynn in the two pregnancies she began, as it also appeared to do for some other participants who had been pregnant for a time.¹³¹ It may be that for many of these women, this dimension is realized *partially* in other ways in their lives; through their fantasies of maternity, through being social mothers, and through nurturing and generativity in wider relationships with others. However, for women that have a biological child it might be understood to be realized *differently* in relationship to a child in the womb because in that case there is a direct continuation of matrixial state through the passageway of birth, after which it becomes overlaid by the phallic dimensions of subjectivity and the necessity for the repeated separations of weaning, language acquisition (Kristeva 2005) and so forth. For some of these circumstantially childless women an important aspect of their sense of loss may be in not realizing it in the form of a pregnancy and a child. This possibility is reflected in those narratives and drawings that emphasize the embodied aspects of nurturing a baby and child, such as Lynn's and Toni's.

It appears that the creative ways in which many of these women have enacted their maternal fantasies evade available discourses of the maternal. This interpretation is consistent with their perception that their expression of what they experience to be the maternal aspects of their subjectivity in forms other than being 'mother' are always understood by others in their social worlds to be in some way inferior to the gold standard of ongoing biological mothering; at best as a "way of coping with childlessness" (Letherby 2012, p.14), at worst illegitimate and laughable.

Inevitably then, these women articulate loss and yearning. However, while my aim has been to probe this loss in order to understand the experience of circumstantial childlessness in their

¹³¹ Maree, Julia, Connie, Gina, Kim, Irene and Toni all spoke specifically about the ways in which a pregnancy which was aborted or ended in miscarriage galvanised a change in their fantasies of maternity.

lives in a more nuanced way, I do not want to overstate the difficulties of it, or position them as ‘victims’, or sufferers of it. In discussing the *something* that still nudged Lynn, for example, I want to acknowledge that this is a “little something”; that “mostly” she described herself as “pretty comfortable” within her life. These are women who are responding to the inevitable “disappointment” (Craib 1994) of life in creative and effective ways.

Chapter 7: A “narratable” life

A life that is not fully narratable is vulnerable to devaluation. Certainly stories told about categories of persons can injure those persons. But silences can be equally injurious, implying that there is no story to tell about lives such as these. Resistances to these silences begins by making them narratable, telling the stories can make lives vivid and morally recognizable.

(Frank 2010, p.75)

7.1 Introduction: “a place where I am ‘mother’”

This thesis contributes to knowledge about circumstantial childlessness in the hope that it may be better understood; that stories about the lives of women who are circumstantially childless might become, in Arthur Frank’s words, more “narratable”.¹³² Its focus is on a subject area that has received little attention empirically, and is addressed only superficially in popular media. The knowledge claims I am making for the thesis are about reframing, challenging and extending understandings of circumstantial childlessness. Under an overarching object relations framework I have demonstrated the value of utilizing a range of theoretical approaches to interpret and dig deep into detailed understandings of what women in these circumstances have to say. I provide an analysis of participants’ accounts that is a carefully nuanced consideration of their experiences, and that adds depth and complexity to the treatment made of this topic in magazines, newspapers and the internet. In this chapter I bring together the insights and arguments I have developed across the three analytic chapters of the thesis.

Throughout the thesis I have remarked on the limitations of working as a sole researcher using the form of psychosocial methods I have employed in it. Except for the process of layering the different forms of data associated with each participant against one another in order to build up a ‘thick description’, it has been impossible to ‘test’ analysis in the ways I might have done if I had been working as part of a research group. My unplanned extended contact with Deborah provided an opportunity to co-create further research materials. In Chapter 4 I explained that I had brief email contact with her, after I sent her a copy of a paper I had written. I emailed Deborah again to ask her permission to quote from her response to it. She replied, and these two emails provided the means for a more careful interpretation of my

¹³² Frank uses the word “narratable” in its usual sense of a story that might be told to others. The perception of a lack of social recognition and social space for their stories, and the subsequent need for a space for these stories to be told, is a central theme of this thesis. As well as this meaning, in my use of his term here I extrapolate from this meaning to one that encompasses the further dimension of a story that is able to be told to oneself and used to make sense of oneself; that is, one that can be symbolized in thought.

analysis, and a further depth to it. My analysis in the thesis draws on material across the entire dataset of 26 women. Its detail comes from the closer attention I paid to the research materials associated with 10 of those women, as I discussed in Chapter 3 (p.63). My repeated focus on Deborah is partly because of the added dimension that communication after the interview provided as I engaged in analysis of her story. I have also used the research materials generated by my interactions with her as a structural device that connects various parts of the thesis.

After she received a published paper from me, Deborah wrote:

I realise that this process of expression (writing for myself) and then choosing to email you what I've written gives not only validity to my 'down the back' children; it also gives validity to the 'me' that is 'mother'. You provide (thank you) the safe, interested, non-judgmental (and well beyond that, accepting) place for me to say what I've said and to hear myself 'say' it in these emails. I feel I am moving on slowly toward a place where I am aware that I am 'mother' in ways that are possible and matter (are of value) to me. Alisdair and Elinor are part, not all, of being 'mother'. And I'm starting to feel ok about that. [...] I think I live within a silent grief because I feel that others think I could have made different choices so somehow the place where I find myself and the feelings I have are my own fault and therefore I should just suck it up and not whinge (the underlying message being "well you could and you didn't, it's not like you are infertile, so you've only yourself to blame for leaving it too late, so why do you expect any sympathy?"). Actually I'm not looking for sympathy—empathy would be great though! In the end it becomes easier to either pretend we wanted children and couldn't have them, or didn't want them at all. Neither is true, but for some reason both of these positions seem more acceptable to others—perhaps because they are the two obvious explanations for not being parents?

In this email, Deborah developed points she had made earlier about her fantasy children, and the process of adaptation to the loss of their embodiment—and her embodiment as a mother—she was engaged in. In the sections that follow, I refer back to this extract in my discussion of the thesis' central themes of fantasy, loss and adaptation to different forms of motherhood.

7.2 Ways of 'knowing'

The methodology I chose for this thesis has shaped the knowledge that I have produced from it. Clarke (2006, p.1166) writes that psychosocial methods provide "glimpses and insights into our internal world which [add] a further layer of understanding to sociological analysis". It was important for me to base the research in a methodology that accounted for this "further layer" in my chosen focus on processes of fantasy and grieving in circumstantial childlessness, since I understand these processes to be constructed in the overlap of these women's 'inner' and 'outer' worlds.

Throughout each stage of the project I have attempted to tread a sometimes difficult path in embracing ways of 'knowing' that acknowledge "the indistinct and the slippery" (Laws 2004,

p.3) in research materials. My analyzes of non-linguistic forms of communication are examples of ways of knowing in which I was able to access some of these ‘slippery’ aspects of women’s narratives. In the extract from Deborah’s email that I reproduce here, for example, her words are very considered and reflective, as is her language throughout the interview and previous email. In comparison with the transcript of the spoken interview however, her words here feel almost ‘flat’ in the sense that, because they come from an email, they do not have the added richness and nuancing that attention to the non-linguistic elements and forms of communication of her interview was able to provide.

Paying attention to these aspects of these women’s stories of circumstantial childlessness has been a feature of the design of this project. My interview with Kelly, where her pauses and repetitions often provided a counterpoint to the words she was saying, is a further example. My adaptation of Bollas’ notion of a ‘symphonic score’ (see Chapter 3, p.71, and Appendix 5, p.211) in a notation system that allowed me to record non-linguistic elements across the whole dataset has been a useful aspect of the research strategy I used. While every individual’s use of these elements is particular to them, people learn to use non-linguistic features such as sighs, gasps and nervous laughs from others, in the same way as they learn spoken language, and in this way they too have shared meanings. Researchers can further develop their collective and individual skills in interpreting and analysing these features, and I hope that this thesis contributes to this development.

My use of participant-produced drawings is a key feature of the research design. While there is a burgeoning of interest in the alternative possibilities to text that visual methods offer, the use of participant-produced drawings in this kind of psychosocial qualitative project in this way is uncommon. My use of the method in this project was limited, but demonstrated its potential for further development. The use of crayons and paper for the production of the drawings in signaling the level of drawing detail I expected worked well as a research strategy. It would be useful to experiment with other versions of the use of participant-produced drawing as a method. I could have incorporated drawing into individual interviews, or encouraged the production of drawings over the course of two or three individual interviews. I might also have developed discussion in group interviews of the drawings participants made.

The data in these drawings can receive more detailed analysis in papers that focus specifically on these visual texts, and that develop the analysis through attention to more of the drawings, or through comparing them with one another in greater depth. In this project I have been able to use those associated with Maree, Gina, Connie, Lynn and Julia at various points in the

thesis to extend my analysis of their data in useful ways. Lynn's drawing (Chapter 3, p.78), for example, provided a valuable further dimension to the narratives she offered in the individual and group interviews.

7.3 Fantasy: Exploring “the indistinct and the slippery”

Nowhere were the qualities Law writes of more apparent than in my discussion of these women's fantasies of maternity and a child. Fantasies slipped and slid through the narratives—and sometimes drawings—of all of the participants of this study. All of the women I interviewed appeared to have constructed some fantasies of themselves as a mother, and often of a child or children. Their narratives demonstrated a fluid investment in these fantasies that shifted with time, and was tangled with the inevitable changes in their bodies as they aged.

One of the key themes that I have explored in the thesis is the idea that some of the participants in this study experience themselves to be *already* a mother in some ways, although they do not have a biological child. As I have illustrated, Deborah's fantasies of Elinor and Alisdair were detailed, and explicitly discussed, but other women's maternal fantasies did not appear so explicitly. While these fantasies clearly have both conscious and unconscious dimensions, the women I interviewed varied in their willingness or capacity to explore or communicate their fantasies of maternity and a child. The object relations concept of the unconsciously defended and ambivalent subject provides an explanation for why this may be (see Chapter 2, p.26). It may be that some participants defended themselves against the pain of the loss of their experience by denying or repressing their fantasies of maternity or a child.¹³³

There appeared to be a spectrum of subtlety to the fantasies, from those that were conscious and described in detail to those that were not as obvious, but were implicit in the ways participants talked about aspects of their story. Like Deborah's named children, Connie's “dark-haired boys” and Isabella's pony-riding daughter were examples of fantasy children that were explicitly discussed in the interviews. Similarly, when Janine talked of the kind of mother she would like to be—perceptive, aware, nurturing and focused—and Maree spoke of the ways she talked to “the little embryo” in her womb, their fantasies of being a mother were evident in their talk. Some participants did not make claim to a fantasy of maternity and a

¹³³ Gina's comments about her deliberate repression of her thoughts about the “child” she aborted—“it's that hopelessness of ever knowing what that person would have been like [...] you tell your brain to just [pause] shut up. There's *absolutely* no point pursuing it”—illustrated a conscious version of this.

child, however, their fantasies were discernable in other ways; in their visions of what it might be like to be a mother, sometimes expressed in ambivalent terms, or in their descriptions of caring for other people's children. Lesley's fears of "living in a rundown old house [...] struggling to find money for food and having to rely on my parents for top-up things" painted a vivid picture of the darker sides of her fantasies of solo motherhood. The small intimacies in Gina's story of caring for her best friend's newborn baby—of comforting him when he cried and singing to him—can be interpreted through the frame I have constructed in this thesis not simply as 'babysitting', but as her enacting her own idiosyncratic "sense of myself as a mother" through her interactions with this child.

In the extract above, Deborah showed her willingness to claim aspects of the subjectivity of 'mother', at least in the context of our communication. In Chapter 5, in my discussion of the research materials associated with Julia, I demonstrated how she too understood herself to be already a mother in some ways, and enacted that assumed subjectivity in the ritual of remembering her "children", even though she said she had not yet had the "courage" to be "very visible with that yet". I have suggested, however, that in most cases a highly nuanced understanding of 'mother' is necessary to take account of this "sense of myself as a mother". I suspect that if I were to ask many of the participants in this research directly whether or not they experienced themselves as mothers, it is very likely that many would deny doing so. The discrepancy (between my analysis and what I think it is likely participants would claim) is accounted for by the ways in which, in popular understanding, fantasy is set in opposition to 'reality', and 'mother' is limited to the embodied care of a child (preferably understood to be a biological child). Considering these women as *already* a mother in some way appears nonsensical, if taking up a maternal subjectivity is indexed to the existence of a child, as it is usually understood to be. In Chapter 4 I argued that this possibility is more intelligible when both maternal subjectivity and fantasy are conceived of in particular ways. I proposed that 'fantasy mother' could be considered as a further dimension of maternal subjectivity—along with those of genetic, gestational and carer (Welldon 2006)—that could be understood to begin before a girl's birth, and to continue throughout her lifetime.

Several women that I interviewed said that, as far as they knew, they had never been pregnant. In contrast, Julia, Maree, Gina, Irene, Connie, Toni, Lynn and Kim were all participants who spoke explicitly about having been pregnant at some point. In some cases these women had miscarried, and in others they had terminated the pregnancy because they

made the decision that the time or circumstances were not right for them to proceed with it.¹³⁴ In these participants' cases, their fantasy of maternity and a child had been briefly embodied, and many of these women linked the way they saw themselves as mothers to the experience they had of having conceived, and briefly carried, a child. The terminology women used might be interpreted as suggestive of the relationship they felt to the miscarried or aborted foetus/child; for example, Julia described them as her "children" and Maree's spoke of making a connection with "the little embryo". From a matrixial perspective the sense of ongoing connection of some sort that Julia, Maree and Toni articulated, and others implied, is relevant. In matrixial theory, these women's transsubjective feel/knowing of the other life that had briefly shared the matrixial borderspace with them, is understood to hold an imprint of it which would have a continuity in their own lives.

Not all of the women who spoke of having had terminations talked of an attachment or sense of a relationship to the foetus/child, but all of them spoke about it as being something they had continued to think about in relation to their not having gone on to have a child. Their stories underlined what Lynn described as the "messy" complexities of abortion, and the "irony"—for circumstantially childless women—of wanting children and having terminations. The issue of terminations is a difficult area for feminist research, because it involves confronting the ongoing emotional and psychological work some women do post-termination, which does not always sit easily with advocacy for women's right to have terminations. An argument can be made for women's rights to reproductive choices that also acknowledges the sometimes difficult emotional outcomes of those choices. This research could be linked to future work relating to the experiences and understandings of women who have had terminations or early stage miscarriages; both with respect to how they conceptualize themselves and their relationships to the foetus/child, and to the issues of disenfranchised grief that may be their experience.

In Chapter 4 I drew on a range of sources to theorize about the origins of these fantasies of maternity and a child. I suggested that women's fantasies of motherhood may be shaped by what they have 'known' of it in various ways: trans-subjectively before their birth (Ettinger 2006a, 2006b); intersubjectively through their "vestigial experience" of their own mother (Hollway 2006, p.65); trans-generationally through the impact of their own mothers' experience and fantasies of motherhood; through their observation of other mothers as an infant and child; and through their immersion in the conflicting and contradictory social

¹³⁴ I did not ask a direct question about experiences of pregnancy and miscarriages or terminations, but these women volunteered this information. Others may have had these experiences without speaking of them in the interview.

discourses of mothering as they grew to adulthood. Lax (2006, p. 4) writes that “(m)aternal inwardness, the creation and enjoyment of the “fantasy child”, and the fantasy of the interactional relationship with this child is the most significant preparatory state for motherhood”. She makes this statement in the context of a discussion about the psychic preparation a woman makes when she is pregnant. The research materials I have analyzed suggest that for many of the participants in this project, the “creation and enjoyment” of the fantasy child and their interaction in fantasy with her or him appears to begin much earlier.

Throughout my work on this thesis I have been intuitively convinced that Ettinger’s matrixial theory offers a potential to understand a further dimension of what Spigel (2009) calls the “slippery nature of the maternal” in the experience of circumstantial childlessness. In particular, in its radical reinterpretation of the ‘relationship’ between mother-to-be and child-to-be and the potential for traces of that trans-subjective relating to continue alongside the intersubjective relating that develops after birth, it offers a way of thinking about a woman’s yearning for the matrixial experience of pregnancy and motherhood that is not simply a nurturing altruism.¹³⁵ ¹³⁶ In turn, I consider that circumstantial childlessness has the potential to illuminate aspects of the further use of matrixial theory in empirical psychosocial studies. Matrixial theory, however, is complex and controversial. Within the parameters of social science research it can be read as speculative and overgeneralising. Although Ettinger writes from a feminist perspective, it presents a challenge for feminist analysts in that it can be misconstrued as essentialising. In this thesis I have felt constrained by these problems and issues of space in which to develop them adequately. I have not fully explored the potential for understanding the experience of circumstantial childlessness through the frame of matrixial theory—or for using this material to further explore matrixial theory empirically—in an extensive way. Instead I have used it on a smaller scale to suggest an earlier—pre-birth—dimension in which some aspects these participants’ narratives might be interpreted, and some of the ways this dimension might continue to resonate in this aspect of their lives, albeit in a largely foreclosed stratum of existence. There remains a rich potential for further work that explores circumstantial childlessness through the lens of matrixial theory.

I have drawn more extensively on Winnicott’s work in understanding the origins and nature of these fantasies. The narratives of many of these participants illustrated the ways in which

¹³⁵ I use ‘relationship’ in single quotes here to highlight that from a matrixial perspective the word relationship—which implies a ‘me’ and a ‘not-me’ who relate with one another—is inaccurate. The matrixial borderspace is patterned on the unique non-binary relational dynamics of neither/both, two/one, between a mother-to-be and the child-to-be in her womb, for which phallic language has no words.

¹³⁶ I am grateful to Wendy Hollway for the term ‘nurturing altruism’. It captures well both the positive potential and the limits of the ways women chose to adapt their fantasies of maternity in other forms of mothering.

their maternal fantasies permeate their everyday lives in vivid—although usually intensely personal—ways. In order to make sense of this, I have discussed these fantasies in terms of Winnicott's (1971) notion of a 'transitional space'. I have speculated theoretically that the psychic 'place' in which they might be experienced and explored in conversation (and in Deborah's case, correspondence) with me could be related to this space "between inner reality and external life" (Hollway 2011, p.50); a space that bridges their 'inner' and 'outer' worlds. Winnicott (1971) used this concept to consider the process whereby some of the contents and processes of an individual's inner world are made manifest through art, creativity, and play, as well as in the analytic encounter.¹³⁷

The idea of a 'space' is at the heart of another device I have used to make sense of the power of these fantasies in these women's lives. In Chapter 2 I conceptualized absence as a negative space. A negative space is a space of potent presence, where what is *not* defines—and is defined by—what *is* around it. In a work of art its power is in its capacity to make visible the equal importance, to the whole, of the places where there appears to be nothing. I theorized that in the experience of circumstantial childlessness, the space of absent presence is not filled with memories of something that was once a tangible and material presence, but with the powerful fantasies of maternity and a child in the future.

Conceptualizing these participants' fantasies in these ways has made it possible to think of them as psychic constructions that have material effects in their lives. When Janine said that "everything here [in her house] is in the shape of a baby", she was indicating that her particular fantasies of maternity and a child were already taking material form in the ways that she and her husband had chosen and planned their choice of a home and their use of the spaces within and around it. These things then came to re-present—to symbolize—her maternal fantasies. For other women the absent child/ren were symbolized in other ways: by naming the child or children of their fantasy as Deborah and Shelley spoke of doing; by buying clothing or toys for them as Sonya talked of, by the reminders of the embodied acts of nurturing a baby or child, particularly through breastfeeding, as Lynn's drawing (p.78) illustrated; in noticing other pregnant women or small children; and in imagined acts of mothering such as attending school plays or sports matches.

¹³⁷ Ettinger's conception of the matrixial borderspace, which she understands to be a prototype for this 'space', develops this idea much further (see for example Massumi 2006; Ettinger 2004).

7.4 The disenfranchised grief of circumstantial childlessness

In Chapter 1 I described the process in which I gradually narrowed my focus for this study to an exploration of the meanings that being—or not being—a mother *matters* to the circumstantially childless women in this study. I was interested to know whether there was a sense of loss, and, if so, what they understood to be lost, and what the response to those losses might be. Although I framed the study carefully, in a way that did not presume that they would feel loss, an experience of loss *was* threaded through the narratives of all of these participants, to a greater or lesser extent. My analysis of these research materials clearly demonstrates that loss, and a grieving that is associated with it, is a significant part of the experience of circumstantial childlessness for the participants of this study.

While all of the participants talked about a sense of loss, there was a range of ways in which they talked about that loss being difficult for them. While some talked about it being painful at times—but not by any means overwhelming—several participants compared their experience of the intensity, emotional distress and duration of the losses of circumstantial childlessness with the grieving they had experienced at the death of someone close.

Discussing their responses in Chapter 5, I drew in part on a Kleinian theorization of the mourning process in which an individual re-engages with the very early developmental processes of grieving for the feared loss of the ‘good’ object of the mother in her or his later losses in life. I suggested that the unconscious anxiety of that process may be a factor in the intensity of the grieving that some women spoke of.

In spite of the parallels some women drew between the losses of circumstantial childlessness and those of bereavement, in analyzing the research materials I found that that there are significant distinctions to be made between these women’s experiences and that of people who are grieving for the absence of something or someone that once existed as part of their everyday life. I discussed how these divergences are related to a different temporal and material logic: the losses of circumstantial childlessness are of a potential future, rather than the past, and of a fantasy rather than an embodied or material reality of which they have memories. When these participants had not had an expected biological child, it seems that the material and embodied symbols of their maternal fantasies that I discussed above were amongst the *triggers* for their sense of loss, but it is what these things represented—rather than what they in themselves were—that was lost.

In order to make sense of these losses, I have needed to stretch the boundaries of both popular and theoretical understandings of loss. I found neither Kleinian theory (and the Freudian

theory of mourning on which it is originally based), nor contemporary psychological conceptualizations of grieving, were useful in forming ideas about the kinds of losses these participants spoke of feeling, or the grieving they did in response to them. In particular, I needed to find a way in which the experience of circumstantial childlessness was not framed negatively as a failure or a tragedy in these women's lives, while at the same time acknowledging the often painful losses that it entailed for them. I found Craib's (1994) focus on the importance of "disappointment" as a response to the inevitable losses and difficulties of life to be useful in doing this, although the word itself seems inadequate to encompass the anguish that some of these women described themselves feeling.

The "silent grief" that Deborah refers to in the second part of the extract from her email that I quote above is related to her sense of what I have discussed in Chapter 5 (p.141) as the *disenfranchised* quality of the experience of circumstantial childlessness. In this study I have shown the disenfranchisement of these women's loss and associated grieving to be a significant aspect of this experience. In some way, every participant spoke of their sense that they feel misunderstood, judged, unacknowledged, ignored, and isolated by others, in this aspect of their lives. Deborah's memory of her brother telling her to "get your own children, and don't steal mine" was a vivid example.

I also noted the ways in which these women at times appear to have internalized the 'grieving rules' that bring this disenfranchisement about, and minimize their own experience of grief in these circumstances. This is a complex, subtle, largely unconscious process, and there are several factors that initiate it. I have commented throughout the thesis on the ways in which the narratives of these women can frequently be read as an internal conversation between conflicting aspects of themselves. It could be that, along with the experiences of perceived misunderstanding, criticism and isolation that Deborah and many other participants recounted, part of the critical and judging "underlying message" that Deborah ascribes to others in the introductory extract, is also one that an accusatory part of her makes to another part of herself. Self-disenfranchisement is a descriptive example of the ways in which the 'inner' and 'outer' aspects of the experience of circumstantial childlessness are inextricably part of one another.

In the 30 years since Doka's concept of disenfranchised grief was first developed and introduced in 1982, it has been applied in a range of loss settings. My use of this concept in this context has made it possible to develop it further. My finding about the ways in which the experience of disenfranchisement is linked to these issues of agency and choice is a particularly pertinent to the notion of disenfranchised grief. Maree's comment that circumstantially childless women are "not allowed to feel any loss about it, because they've

made that happen that way” illustrated her perception that other people invalidated her experience because she had made choices that have resulted in her being childless. She insisted that “I give myself the right, privately” to grieve, but also noted that “it seems logical looking from the outside in, um, if a woman had the opportunity to have a child and, and didn’t and then was sad about not having children that wouldn’t make much sense”. Several other participants oscillated between disenfranchising their own experience and simultaneously resisting this disenfranchisement as she did. Her comments highlight the difference in the capacity for agency that she and other participants understood themselves to have in relation to having children, when compared with what they perceived others in their social worlds generally to see them having. As I have illustrated, time and again participants voiced their feeling that there is no real understanding of the complexity of the ‘choices’ they had made that had culminated in their being circumstantially childless. This is highlighted in Deborah’s comments that— from her perspective—there is no story for her to tell that makes sense of her predicament to others, and she feels forced to “pretend” in order for it to be comprehensible to others.

7.5 Issues of agency and choice

Self-disenfranchising their grief responses is a further example of the ways in which issues of agency and choice ran right through these participants’ narratives. The complexities of how agency works in people’s lives were at the heart of the problem the women in one of the group interviews had with the notion of ‘contingent childlessness’. My intention in using this term was to capture the sense in which these women’s decisions about when, and whether (or not) to have a child was contingent on other factors in their lives; financial security, a partner to share care of the baby, a career established or an educational goal achieved, and so forth. Seligmann-Silva (2006, p.135) writes that to think of contingency means to reflect on a series of concepts such as “chance, accident, rupture, catastrophe, [and] chaos”, and to dialectically confront them with others such as “necessity, fate, experience, [and] rationality”. For some of the participants with whom I discussed this term, ‘contingent’ felt like a judgment that they had not taken charge of their lives as they ‘should’ have. Things had ‘just happened’ to them; they had left their life too much to chance, or that their unconscious desires or anxieties may have undermined their conscious decision-making in ways they did not plan. The presumed ability to conceive a child and carry it to term is the key difference between the experience of circumstantial childlessness and biological infertility. For these women, the sense that their predicament is their ‘own fault’ contributes to them disenfranchising their own sense of loss, and inhibits them from seeking support from others.

As I have noted, in several of these interviews there appears to be a linkage between these women's fantasies of motherhood and their experience of their *mother's* experience of being a mother that is both conscious and unconscious. Some women, such as Janine and Lesley, were clear that they wanted to provide a different experience of being a child for a child of their own. The desire to create a different kind of childhood than the one they experienced as painful or lacking is recognised as being a motivating desire for women (and men) to have a child (Lax 2006), but here I link it with the experience of circumstantial childlessness, to issues of agency and choice, and to the neo-liberal agenda that I discussed in Chapter 2. The tenets of individualization require young women to compete and succeed. They are expected to take responsibility for constructing their own lives and provide the conditions they perceive to be necessary for the successful development of their children. For women like Lesley and Maree, the determination to create and provide the 'right' emotional and material circumstances in which to raise a child, within the temporal limits of their fertility, may ironically be one of the factors that contributed to their becoming circumstantially childless. In prioritizing decisions about the circumstances in which they would have a child, and exercising agency in this way, they found they lost control over whether or not they would become mothers.

This sense of being out of control of their lives was difficult for people who saw themselves to be agents in their own lives but who have not been successful in having a child. For women such as Gina, Lynn, Connie, Sonya and Kelly—all of whom were in a committed relationship with someone who was unwilling or unable to have a child with them—the complexities of 'choice' were particularly painful. These women made decisions about the relationships they were committed to, and one of the outcomes of those decisions is that they did not have children. Gina's comment that "(m)aybe I should have made this choice [to leave her husband] long ago and [pause] given that I didn't, I don't have any right to gripe about it [not having had children] now" captures the complexity of the link between agency, choice and the right to grieve. This complexity is what lay behind Julia's reluctant admission that her choices had been "passive" rather than "active". Elsa made the same point about continuing on with postgraduate study, even though she was concerned that her fertility was fading (see Chapter 5, p.144). The experience of circumstantial childlessness highlights the complexities of this relation between structure and agency; in this case, women are confronted by the limits inherent in their bodies and the embodied constraints of their fertility.

7.6 A process of adaptation

My research has lead me to conclude that when participants have not had a child biologically these circumstantially childless women have not simply abandoned the potential maternal subjectivity and child(ren) of their fantasies in the pursuit of alternative subjectivities, as the popular cliché of ‘Oh No! I forgot to have children!’ implies.¹³⁸ Gradually realizing that biological motherhood was unlikely or impossible, grieving for the opportunity to embody their maternal fantasies in the birth and nurture of a biological child, and finding alternative ways to do so in their life appears to be a process that is actively engaged in over several years in these women’s lives. The varying ways the participants talked about this process was the focus of Chapter 6, and I have argued that in some respects it may be understood to be boundless; temporally, socially and relationally.

Deborah’s words in the extract from her email that begins this chapter illustrate aspects of this process. I have suggested that, as her words imply, this process is often lengthy, fraught with loss, ambivalence, and social and emotional complexities. For her, a partial resolution has been in finding ways of being ‘mother’ “that are possible and matter (are of value) to me”. I found that the process for each participant was an idiosyncratic one of consciously and unconsciously mining her fantasies of maternity and a child— her “sense of myself as a mother”—for the aspects that were important to her understanding of herself, and creating ways to embody those in other ways in her life. For example, Lesley’s choice to retrain in a different career as a counsellor in order to be able to work with people more creatively, Connie’s decision to work further with children in developing countries, and Lynn’s nurturing of her garden and of the planet through social and environmental activism can all be interpreted as examples of this process. Other participants spoke of ‘mothering’ other children in their lives, and the possibility of fostering or adopting a child in the future.

My analysis of these women’s stories suggested that a delicate balance of two apparently contradictory aspects of this experience emerges with this process of adaptation. On one hand many of these women talked positively about finding aspects of their lives to be happy and fulfilling. Lynn’s comment that recent years had “kind of been the happiest of my life [pause] *without* children!”[laughs] exemplified this. This positivity was not about women ‘surviving’, or being happy ‘in spite of’ their circumstantial childlessness, but rather of their finding ways to live their life that were different from what they had expected, but that were not defined in

¹³⁸ This text, or others similar, as a caption in a pop-culture cartoon graphic depicting a close-up of a 1960s era woman is available in merchandise such as mugs, t-shirts and so forth. See Appendix 8 on p.214 for an example.

terms of their having—or not having— a child. On the other hand, this sense of fulfillment co-existed with an ongoing sense of loss of a dimension of embodied maternal experience that was irretrievably foregone once the potential to have a biological child had passed.

7.7 Towards a better understanding of circumstantial childlessness

In this thesis I achieve my overall aim of creating a richer and more nuanced understanding of women's experience of circumstantial childlessness through the close analysis of these participants' stories and drawings. It contributes a resistance to the idea that women's stories of circumstantial childlessness are not "narratable". Although I have explored the linkages between fantasy and loss in circumstantial childlessness, much more research work is needed to facilitate these stories and explore their complexity and diversity.

This research suggests that circumstantially childless women need further opportunities to reflect on their experience. Such opportunities are only possible if circumstantial childlessness as a category of experience becomes more acknowledged socially; if the stories told about this phenomenon reflect the many-faceted implications of it in women's lives, and the creative and satisfying ways that women without biological children express "the me that is 'mother'" are validated and valued.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Description of the sample

Connie	44, city planner (retraining as teacher), living with partner who has an adult child and one grandchild that they frequently care for.
Gina	43, research analyst, living with partner who has three children and two grandchildren they frequently care for.
Deborah	45, lecturer, living with partner.
Elena	37, training in early childcare, single.
Elsa	41, postgraduate student, single.
Irene	40, postgraduate student, living with partner who has part-time care of his two children.
Isabella	37, advertising consultant, living with partner who has part-time care of his two children.
Janine	36, marketer, living with partner.
Julia	48, psychotherapist, single.
Kate	36, counsellor, single
Kelly	38, administrator, living with partner who has part-time care of his two children.
Kim	44, lecturer, single.
Lesley	43, counsellor, single.
Lynn	39, policy analyst, living with partner.
Maree	33, postgraduate student, single.
Natalie	36, manager, living with partner.
Nic	38, administrator, single.
Samantha	36, lecturer, living in a different city to partner during teaching term.
Sarah	48, postgraduate student, single.
Shelley	50, administrator, living with partner who has adult children.
Sonya	40, caregiver, living with partner who has part-time care of his two children.
Sophia	41, not in paid work at time of research, living with partner.
Susie	41, early childhood teacher, single.
Toni	46, lecturer, living with partner. Has shared care of (now adult) niece.

Appendix 2: Being Childless Poster



Being Childless

There is an increasing number of women in their late 30's/early 40's who always saw themselves as having children one day, but find that things haven't worked out that way for them. They may not have met someone they wanted to raise a child with, or their partner may already have children and not want to have more, for instance. Or maybe they have waited to have a baby and then find themselves unable to conceive. These women are coming to terms with possibly not becoming biological mothers.

For some women this experience isn't an issue, while others find it difficult at times. It seems, though, that there is little public understanding of what it is like. Lois Tonkin is a trained counsellor and is a PhD student in Sociology at the University of Canterbury who is researching in this area. She wants to talk to women aged between 35-55 with this experience.

If you would like to talk to Lois about possibly being involved in this research please contact her at:

Phone 03 942 9435, or 021 337942. Email: loistonkin@paradise.net.nz

Appendix 3: Coding Categories

1. Intersubjective relationship with mother
2. Constructions of femininity/motherhood
3. Constructions of family
4. Agency/choice
5. Abortion
6. Exclusion
7. Invisibility
8. Unconscious
9. Biological urges
10. Expectation/perception/responses of others
11. Identity
12. A mother's role
13. Family of origin influence
14. "Spiritual" dimension
15. Feminism
16. Ambivalence
17. Future
18. Childless/childfree
19. Time/age/biological clock
20. Other ways of "having children"
21. End of hope/changes over time
22. Waiting for right man/woman
23. Coping strategies
24. Single parenting
25. Selfishness/selflessness
26. Attitudes changing
27. Grief
28. Stigma
29. Loss

30. Feelings
31. Caring/nurturing
32. 'Having children is what I was meant to do'
33. Envy
34. Potential to be a mother
35. Travelling
36. Reasons for having children
37. Partner's situation
38. Impact of age
39. Chance of "problems"/perfect child
40. Self-disenfranchisement
41. Body
42. Advantages of not having children discourses
43. Labels
44. Other people's voices

Appendix 4: Information Sheet

Name of the project:

Contingent Childlessness: Narratives of desire, being and becoming.

What is this project about?

The number of women who have not had a child is increasing in New Zealand, as it is elsewhere in the world. Some of these women have actively chosen not to have children, but for others the choice of whether or not to have a child depends on other factors—being in the right relationship, or feeling financially secure for example— and sometimes these things haven't come together for them. Women who saw themselves as having a child or children at some point in their lives respond in different ways to finding themselves without children, especially in their late 30s or early 40s when having a baby begins to be less of an option for many women. In this project I will talk to women who find themselves in this position to find out what it's like for them, and how other people in their lives have talked to them about it.

What will happen?

I plan to talk with 20-25 women about their experiences. Each conversation will be private, and will take place in your home or a place that we choose, at a time that is convenient for both of us. If you live away from Christchurch and are happy to do so, we may talk by phone. We will talk for about an hour and a half, and we may arrange to talk for a further session if time runs out. I will tape the conversation, transcribe it and then send the transcription to you if you wish to receive a copy. I will be happy to discuss any changes you may wish to make. I also plan to run discussions with women in groups of 8-10. You may be willing to meet individually, in groups, or both.

Participants in the group will be invited to draw about their experience of contingent childlessness and to discuss their drawings, as well as take part in a general discussion of the issues. You may be willing to meet individually, in groups, or both.

You are free to withdraw from the project at any point, and comments you have contributed will be removed. This will be possible if withdrawal occurs before the material has been analyzed, at which point it is not always possible to isolate and remove an individual's comments.

At the end of the project you will receive a summary of the research findings and have information about writing that is developed out of the project. The information will be used to write a PhD thesis about the findings. I hope that it may also eventually be able to be published elsewhere to increase awareness about this form of childlessness.

How will your privacy be protected?

Your conversation with me is strictly confidential: your identity and details will be protected with a pseudonym, the data from this project will be kept secure in a locked cabinet in my office and destroyed after 5 years have elapsed. Any identifying characteristics will be changed in any reports or writing that grows out of the project.

Contacts for the project:

This project is being carried out as a part of study for a PhD in Sociology by Lois Tonkin under the supervision of Dr Victoria Grace. You can contact Lois by phoning her at 942 9435 or emailing her at loistonkin@paradise.net.nz, and Victoria at victoria.grace@canterbury.ac.nz Either will be happy to discuss any concerns you have about the project.

The project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee.

Lois Tonkin

School of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Canterbury.

Appendix 5: Non-linguistic elements

Content

Prn	Shift from “I” to “you” or “we”
Circle	Moral discourse such as use of “should”, “need” or “ought”
≠	Conflicting voices in tension with one another
Rep	Repeated metaphors or phrases, or words
≈	Unexpected links or sequence in the narrative
∅	Voices that are silenced, or things that appear difficult to say
Ppx	Parapraxes

Elements of voice

—	Where stress falls on words
<i>p, pp, f, ff</i>	Volume
\leq, \geq	Pitch
Fast/slow	Tempo/Rhythm
Timbre	Variations in timbre
...	Pauses, silences

Expressions of affect

XX Laugh	Different types of laughs
Tears/crying	Tears
Mood	Tone in which speaker expresses herself

Appendix 6: Group Interview Guide Questions

1. Set up drawing exercise. Drawing prompt: “This research is about this particular form of childlessness. I’d like you to make a drawing about your experience of this?”
2. In this group we can explore differences and similarities in your experiences. There is no name for this particular experience of childlessness, which suggests a kind of social invisibility about it. What is your experience of this?
3. What would you say to younger women in their early 30s about having, or not having children?
4. In an ideal world, what would you want people to know about your experience (without having to be told)?
5. What has it been like to talk to others in a group today about this?

Appendix 7: Individual Interview Questions Guide

1. How did you see yourself in terms of having a child or being a mother as you were growing up?
2. Why, or why not, was being a mother or having a child important to you?
3. How did things work out for you? How come it hasn't happened?
4. How have you seen yourself as being a mother or having a child as time has passed?
5. Can you talk about any factors or times that have made this difficult for you?
6. How have you seen yourself as having or making choices about having a child as time went by?
7. How have other people responded to your not having children? How do you feel about that?
8. How do you see attitudes to women not having children changing?
9. Some women have talked about a sense of loss about not having a child or being a mother. Is that something you relate to?
10. People talk a lot about a "biological clock" ticking, and of time "running out". How have you thought about time in relation to having a child or not over these years?
11. How has this experience shaped your feelings about your body or your sense of yourself as a woman?
12. How would your life be different if you were a mother?
13. What does it mean to you, not to have a child?
14. Can you describe the feelings associated with not having a child? Can you think of specific instances?
15. What does being a mother mean to you?
16. How do you see the child/parent relationship?
17. How do you see the future?
18. What kinds of other ways are there of "having children"?
19. Why were you interested in being part of this research? What are you hoping might come out of it?

Appendix 8: "I Forgot" Mug



Appendix 9: Ethics Approval



HUMAN ETHICS COMMITTEE

Secretary, Lynda Griffioen
Email: human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz

HEC Ref: HEC 2008/121

29 October 2008

Ms Lois Tonkin
School of Sociology & Anthropology
UNIVERSITY OF CANTERBURY

Dear Lois

The Human Ethics Committee advises that your research proposal "Contingent childlessness: Narratives of desire, being and becoming" has been considered and approved.

Please note that this approval is subject to the incorporation of the amendments you have provided in your email of 22 October 2008. The Committee have noted and agree with your response to the comment provided on the group consent form.

Best wishes for your project.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Michael Grimshaw', written over a light green rectangular background.

Dr Michael Grimshaw
Chair, Human Ethics Committee

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